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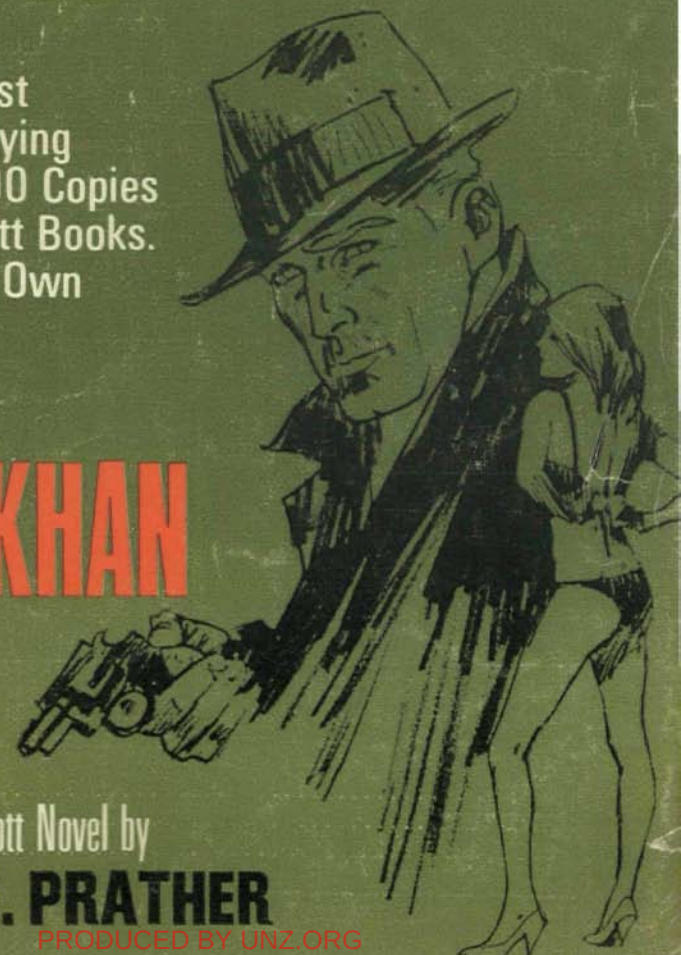

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SHELL SCOTT MYSTERY MAGAZINE

APRIL, 1966 Vol. 1, No. 3

NEW BOOK-LENGTH SHELL SCOTT NOVEL

THE KUBLA KHAN CAPER

by RICHARD S. PRATHER

She was very blonde, very lovely—and very dead. And a character with more money than morals had given Scott exactly twenty-four hours to find her killer, save him from the gas chamber—and somehow stay alive himself. Yes, a mad killer was prowling the Hollywood hills, and he had Scott in his telescopic sights. So—Shell went to work.

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Complete

THE NEW SHELL SCOTT NOVEL

THE KUBLA KHAN CAPER

A harmful little armful had promised to show me a party that would slay me. And suddenly I got her message—for the host was a grinning character named Death . . .

by RICHARD S. PRATHER

FROM WHERE I lay in lazy ease on a poolside chaise longue, I could see a gaggle of Bikini-clad Hollywood *houris* squealing and splashing in the water. On the blue-tiled deck across the pool from me half a dozen bare-midriffed nautch girls wiggled, doing what comes nautchurally.

Flame from burning torches wavered in the soft, warm wind; thin, oddly melodic music swelled from strings and reeds and pipes, filling the desert air with an almost scented sound. It was music to my ears, balm in my eyes, perfume for my nose—something fun for practically all of me.

This, I thought was how I hoped to live when I died. With luck, however, I wouldn't get killed tonight. Tomorrow, maybe.

I had been shot at already, earlier this evening, and I had seen sudden, brutally ugly death. But it was difficult to dwell on death in the midst of so much life; and there was really no reason, I told myself,

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why a man shouldn't enjoy his work.

This was the pre-opening party, the night before the grand opening of Palm Desert's newest and most luxurious hotel, the *Kubla Khan*. It looked like something from the Arabian nights, plunked down in the Southern California desert.

At the moment it had more of a carnival air than it would after this upcoming weekend. Colorful silken streamers were laced overhead, hanging from poles, fluttering in the sage-and-jasmine scented breeze.

Nearly all of the two hundred guests were in costume, most with at least some flavor of the east—saris from India, fezzes from Turkey, robes from Morocco, even one gal wearing a Balinese dancer's headdress. I looked rather resplendent myself, I thought, with my six feet, two inches and two hundred and six pounds clad in a long scarlet jacket and keen white pants with little red stripes down their sides, on my chest lots of crackerjack medals and hero awards—also rented, of course—and concealing my short-cropped and springy white hair, a wildly impressive white turban.

The effect of sheer beauty was perhaps marred only by the bent-down-at-the-ends inverted-V eyebrows over my gray eyes, since those brows were also obtrusively white and thus, in a bad light, might give rise to suspicion that part of the turban had fallen off and stuck on my forehead.

And naturally nothing could be done about my twice-broken and still bent nose, the bullet clipped ear top, the fine scar over my right eye, and the general impression of recent catastrophe I've been told I sometimes present. But I felt, nonetheless, that I had done the best I could with myself; and I was enjoying the evening.

Tonight's festivities were not open to the general public. Tomorrow the *hoi polloi* could get in, but only after the official ceremonies and ribbon-cutting at noon—which ceremonies would be attended by Hollywood stars and TV celebrities, political personalities who would probably make speeches, numerous VIP's and potent people. There would be all kinds of reporters and columnists and such, the mayor of Palm Springs would be present, and would make a speech.

All of that would be followed by booze in the six bars, buffets by the two swimming pools, dancing to three bands, and what might turn out to be the most stupendous beauty contest in the history of voluptuous statistics.

That was where I came in. I was going to be one of the judges of that stupendous beauty contest. At least that was my "cover."

It is known throughout most of Southern California that I am a

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private detective—the Shell Scott of *Sheldon Scott, Investigations*—but it is also known that Shell Scott would practically dislocate his jaw saying "Yes!" if asked to judge a stupendous beauty contest. It was thus the sly hope of my client—who was already in jail; I wasn't doing too well for him yet—that celebrants hereabouts would assume I was merely here for eyeing and not private-eyeing.

Most of the lovelies who would display their epidermis, charms, and doo-dads in the contest tomorrow were already displaying not merely the hot *hors d'oeuvres* but practically the full course, and I'd been having lots of fun. For example, at two adjacent booths were a gal selling kisses and a gal selling cookies, and I wasn't going to buy any cookies.

If I could keep getting missed when guys shot at me, and solve two murders by noon tomorrow—yeah, I had nearly sixteen hours in which to do all that— I figured I could really enjoy this affair.

For a moment I thought of my client in the can, and wondered if the local law really believed he'd been murdering people. I kind of wondered if he had, myself. I had taken it, however, so it was up to me to earn my hundred dollars. Or ten thousand dollars.

It depended on a character named Ormand Monaco.

Ormand Monaco was the owner of the *Kubla Khan,* the guy responsible for this Oriental saturnalia. He was the guy who very much wanted to be here greeting his guests, beaming upon assorted beauties, drinking his prize brandy and taking well-deserved bows. He was also the guy now languishing in the bastile, my apoplectic client.

He had not been apoplectic when he phoned me this afternoon. Not at all. He had been almost calm. He'd called me from Palm Desert at two P.M. this afternoon, Friday, a zesty Friday in September. I'd finished reading a book and was intently watching, as is my custom when affairs are not pressing, the fish atop my office bookcase. Fish—guppies. I'm nuts about guppies.

The phone rang. I walked to the big beat-up mahogany desk and grabbed the receiver. "Hello," I said. "Shell Scott."

The voice was mellow, pleasant, almost drawling. "Mr. Scott. My name is Ormand Monaco."

II

I KNEW the name Ormand Monaco. Most people in this part of the world knew it.

"How do you do, Mr. Monaco?" I said, wondering what a guy who was supposed to have several million dollars, two Continentals and a Cadillac, three still-friendly ex-wives and numerous possibilities in the running for number four, plus a

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fantastic hotel in Palm Desert would want with me.

He told me. "I'll get right to the point," he said. "I presume you know I am about to open the *Kubla Khan* here in Palm Desert?"

"Yes, sir. I've seen a little more in the news about various wars, but except for—"

"The *Khan* will open to the public tomorrow, but I have invited approximately two hundred guests to a more intimate frolic tonight."

I liked that—"more intimate frolic." The more intimate frolics get, the better I like them. It was going to be quite a bash, undoubtedly.

"These guests will be primarily members of the fourth estate," he went on. "Newspaper men and women, columnists, television commentators. And friends of mine, like the Palm Springs mayor and the governor of California."

"That's nice," I said glumly.

"And of course Mr. Simon Leaf and members of his entourage."

Simon Leaf! He had produced several movies, among them the award-winning *Rape!*, and was now preparing to take over the television industry. At least he was scheduled to produce a television series already set for prime time later.

It was tentatively titled, *Flesh,* a subject which it was presumed would be of some interest to a number of citizens. Which is not to imply that Simon Leaf was not himself interested in flesh. There had been rumors which I will not repeat, in case the kiddies are listening.

Oddly, I was remembering that the prime reason for the much-heralded *Kubla Khan* contest was to uncover wildly shapely and luscious tomatoes who would be rewarded with parts in the TV series, while perhaps in return Simon would be rewarded with parts of the wildly shapely and luscious tomatoes, when Mr. Monaco said, "I presume you are familiar with the talent search which will be concluded here tomorrow?"

Talent search, he called it; but I said, "I am indeed."

"It is to be the culmination of tomorrow's festivities. It is, therefore, of the utmost importance that the proceedings be conducted with dignity and efficiency, with all propriety, and without even the breath of scandal. Do you understand?"

"Yeah. I guess. On the other hand, I've seen some of Mr. Leaf's epics and got the impression he should rename Simon Leaf Productions and call it Fig—"

"Mr. Scott!"

"Yes, sir?"

"Mr. Scott, I have been informed of your ability, integrity, courage, and occasionally unorthodox methods of achieving results. I am assured you fear neither God nor Devil, man nor beast. That is why I phoned you. However, I have also been informed that on

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occasion your tongue runs away with your mouth. I must, ask you to shut up, since when I speak, I do not enjoy hearing anybody *else* speaking."

I had to chuckle. "I'll do my best, sir," I said.

"Splendid. Now, you can understand that adverse publicity of any nature might well be damaging to the success of this enterprise—damaging and possibly fatal to the whole promotion."

He paused.

"Yes," I said.

"Thirty-six lovely girls arrived here at the *Khan* Wednesday and yesterday. They are the contestants selected from all over the country to participate in the finals of the talent search tomorrow. One of them seems to be missing."

He paused again.

"Seems?" I said.

"I spoke to her when she arrived Wednesday morning. She is an extremely beautiful girl. I have as yet found no one who has seen her since yesterday. She did not sleep in her bed last night."

"Well, if she's such an extremely beautiful tomato, perhaps—"

"Mr. Scott!"

"Yeah."

"I have several million dollars invested in this deal. I want you to find out what has happened to the girl—if anything. Guests are already arriving. The private party begins at eight tonight. Tomorrow at noon the grand opening cere-

monies will be held here. Will you come immediately?"

"Immediately."

"I do not wish it known that I have employed you, Mr. Scott—"

"Hey, wait a—"

"Or any other detective. Is that clear?"

"Clear."

"Thus your alleged purpose in coming to the *Kubla Khan* will be to participate in the judging of tomorrow's talent search. Naturally you will thus be free to mingle with—"

"I'm going to be a judge?" I said.

"—all the guests, attend the party, the various ceremonies and functions, and should be able—"

"I'm going to be a judge," I said.

"—to ask certain questions without appearing to be conducting an inquiry. In your official capacity you would naturally be interested in the whereabouts of Miss Jax."

"Miss Jax?"

"Jeanne Jax. She is the missing girl."

"I'll find her."

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"That's the spirit. I will be in my home, here in Palm Desert, until five. When you arrive I will give you any other information you need, and we will discuss your fee."

"That's a good idea."

"I shall expect you, Mr. Scott?"

"I'll be there before five, Mr. Monaco."

We hung up.

"I'm going to be a judge," I said.

II

BY FOUR-THIRTY I was zooming along Desert View Drive in my robin's-egg-blue Cadillac, with the top down and a hot wind on my face. According to Monaco's directions, I figured I was six or seven miles from his home, and the *Kubla Khan* should be only about a mile ahead.

And then there it was.

First I saw the huge central dome, as smooth and sensually rounded as a woman's breast, then a few tall and subtly phallic spires almost but not quite like Indian minarets. And green all around it—green of grass, of trees.

It was truly a beautiful sight, but strangely-jarring. After the modern streets of Palm Springs, the smart shops an almost-futuristic buildings, this looked like something slipped from a warp in time, unreal in the California desert. The view left strange, exotic words floating in my mind, names like Samarkand and Xanadu.

Xanadu. . . . I remembered a girl in harlequin glasses, langorous on my living room divan, quoting something like that to me. "In Xanadu did Kubla Khan a stately pleasure dome decree, where Alph the sacred river ran. . . ."

Whoosh! A guy went past me like a bat out of hell, going like sixty—no, more like ninety: I was going about sixty myself. I guess it was a guy. The dark blue buggy was close on my left and then swinging in ahead, swaying a bit from side to side.

Just for the hell of it I shoved the accelerator down, curious to know if the daredevil was really hitting a hundred miles an hour. A mile slipped under the wheels, then two, and I was holding steady a couple of blocks behind him. The speedometer needle wavered from ninety-five to ninety-six. Nope, not quite a hundred, but quite a hurry. I wondered if the rest of the local citizens drove like this.

There wasn't much traffic. Me and the car ahead, and one other buggy about a mile farther on. We'd been gaining on that third car steadily, but less rapidly now; I assumed its driver had spotted the maniacs behind him in his rear-view mirror and was trying to get out of the way.

And then I started wondering what the hell.

I knew Monaco lived at the end of Yucca Road, a one-lane road running left off Desert View Drive.

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It was about two miles up Yucca to his home, and there was only one turnoff, a dirt road swinging left about halfway up Yucca. I was already slowing down so I could turn off Desert View without leaving the road, and possibly the earth, and it was clear the car in front of me had already begun braking. That farthest car ahead had already swung left and was out of sight behind a good-sized hill, the kind of thing we call a mountain in California.

Were we all going to the same place? Must be a real exciting place, we were all in such a hurry to get there.

The road wiggled like a snake, rising slightly but steadily. I never did see both cars again, but caught a glimpse of the nearer one a couple of times. Nearly a mile up Yucca the road straightened for two or three hundred yards, and I gave the Cad more gas, feeling some curiosity about the dark blue buggy now visible ahead of me.

But then the driver braked suddenly, skidded, slid left and seemed to disappear into the mountain. I slowed, came almost to a stop at the spot where he'd turned. Dust rose and swirled lazily above a dirt road there, which rose toward a depression on Moss Mountain, perhaps the lowest spot along its rim. Near me I saw a weathered sign in the shape of an arrow pointing up the road, and the words, *Harding Ranch* in black paint on the sign.

Maybe it was Papa Harding racing home to Mama. After a year at sea. Maybe not. I kept going on up Desert View. In another minute I caught sight of Monaco's house.

It sat cupped in a hollow on the side of Moss Mountain. There must have been forty rooms inside the place and the entire stock of seventeen nurseries outside it. Tall palms rose near the water and behind the house. A black-topped drive curved past the water and ended in a hundred-foot circle at the base of stone steps leading up to the entrance.

In the circle was parked a three-year-old Buick coupe, its left-hand door open. I drove up near it, parked, and got out of the Cad. Above me, with her back to the big carved-wood doors, a woman stood, staring down at me.

I waved; she didn't. But, after staring at me for a few seconds longer, she moved from the door and started down the stone steps.

I walked forward to meet her, but she was at the bottom of the steps by the time I reached them, skipping along at a pretty good pace.

Lovely she was. Tall, maybe five-eight, wearing a pale blue skirt over flaring hips, a tan leather belt cinched tight around a waist that couldn't have been more than twenty-one inches around. In one hand she clutched a big leather handbag the same color as the belt. Her breasts trembled under the

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ivory white cloth as she hurried past me.

"Hey," I said, "wait a shake. Where's the fire? Hello."

She stopped briefly, let vivid blue eyes rest on my face, then glanced around, once up toward the house, then back down the road. Her hair was cut short but was thick and full, the color of harvest-time wheat.

"Nobody home?" I asked.

"No."

"That's funny. Mr. Monaco said he'd be here. Were you supposed to see him?"

She turned and started walking toward her car.

"I'll be seeing him later," I said. "If you'll give me your name I'll tell him you—"

She'd climbed into the Buick and pulled the door shut.

Great. Luscious gal like that, and she'd said two words to me. "Hello," and "No."

I went up the stone steps, found a bell button, which looked a bit like a belly button with a pearl in it, and pushed it tentatively. Somewhere inside the house a gong boomed, sort of a *twuuungg,* like you'd expect to hear when Fu Manchu glides through the silken curtains.

The fluttering echoes died. Nothing. I started to twungg the button again and noticed one of the big double doors was not completely closed. I pushed it and it swung open. Funny. If Monaco wasn't home, it seemed odd he'd leave a lavish joint like this unlocked.

Below me tires crunched in bits of loose gravel on the drive. The noncommittal tomato had started her car, was heading down the blacktop toward Yucca. I shrugged, turned back to the door and looked at it, then walked inside.

"Hello!" I yelled. "Anybody home?" I walked forward over white spongy carpet, my feet barely whispering on the thick nap.

"Hello!"

If there were forty rooms in this place, it would take a while to look through all of them. Be hell if I found a dead body. Like Monaco's, say. Or any kind of dead body.

I stood still for a moment, listening. Then I sighed, took a step forward—and felt my spine stiffen.

I'd heard a sound. Two sounds, actually. Flat, heavy, one right after the other. Not in the house—outside, down the road. And I'd heard that sound too many times not to know what it was. Gunshots.

III

THE FRONT DOOR was still open behind me. I spun around and jumped to it, through it and down those stone steps three and four at a time. I was in the Cad, jabbing my key at the ignition, when I heard the third shot, louder in my ears now that I was outside the house.

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I cramped the wheel, raced down the drive to Yucca and into it, tires skidding. I pushed the gas pedal for half a mile then hit the brakes. The Buick coupe was off the road on my right, fender crumpled against a huge boulder, the side of Moss Mountain dark in shadow beyond it.

As the Cad slowed I looked toward the car, around it, up the slanting side of the hill. But nothing moved that I could see. I stopped near the Buick, eased my .38 Colt Special from its clamshell holster and got out of the car, keeping low.

Nothing happened and I ran to the Buick, shoved my head past the open window—and yanked it back out involuntarily.

It was awful. Half her head was gone. Blood was all over. Above the dashboard, at the base of the window, was a ragged segment of curving bone, and on it a hank of hair the color of harvest-time wheat.

I started back toward my Cadillac, and the radio-phone under the dash. The sudden sight of the girl so messily dead had shocked me, and I guess I let my guard down. The hiss of the slug near my head and the crack of the gun seemed simultaneous.

I hit the dirt and rolled, got my feet under me and stayed crouched for a moment close to the side of my Cad. The shot had come from my left, somewhere up on the hillside. I cocked the .38, then raised up, stood motionless for a second and stepped suddenly to my right.

Whoever was trying to kill me would have missed me even if I hadn't stepped aside. The bullet was high overhead; he'd probably jerked the trigger convulsively.

But I saw the flash this time.

The rim of the hill was only about two hundred feet away, and the dart of fire blazed briefly below the rim. I had my arm extended, Colt cradled in my fist, and I swung it left a bit and up and squeezed off three shots before ducking down again. There were two more shots and I heard a clunk, but neither slug came close to me. I moved to the Cad's rear bumper and poked my head up again—and saw him.

Only for a moment. He was high above me, outlined against the still-bright sky, running. It was a

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man. I snapped another shot at him but knew I missed; the slug kicked up dirt near the hill's rim, hit a rock and whined away. Then the man was out of sight. But by then I was running myself.

I fell twice going up that damned Moss Mountain, slick leather of my shoes slipping on rocks. But I got to the top bleeding only from the palm of my left hand. And a lot of good that speedy climb did me. The far side of the hill was little different from the first side, slanting down for two or three hundred feet to a dirt road, with dust swirling lazily above it. Far to my left a car raced away, going like sixty; or maybe like ninety.

I swore, wrapped a handkerchief around my left hand, and started down the mountain.

Before the deputies arrived I looked at the dead woman again. And at her car. She'd been hit on the chin with one slug, and there was a bullet hole in the right-hand door of the Buick, opposite where the driver would sit. So that explained the third shot.

Obviously one of those first two bullets had hit the car and the other had slammed her chin like a club; that would have sent her off the road, probably knocked her unconscious. So the killer had run to the car from wherever he'd been lying in wait and had, in order to be very very sure, carefully fired another slug into her brain. They must have been heavy caliber bullets, I thought. And for a moment I thought of something else; how lovely that face had been.

Within minutes after I'd used the radio-phone in my Cad to call the Riverside County sheriff's department office in nearby Indio, the first black-and-white sheriff's car arrived. In it was a tall, burly sergeant named Torgesen. Right after him came another car driven by a deputy called Mike.

Torgesen spoke briefly to me and asked a few questions, looked into the Buick, glanced around. Then the sergeant walked over to me, notebook and pencil in his hand.

"You say your name's Scott?"

"That's right. Shell Scott." I showed him my wallet-card attesting to the fact that I was a private investigator licensed by the State of California.

He looked at it, rolled his eyes up to my face, then back to the card. "L.A., huh?" he said gently.

"Right."

"What was your relation with her, Scott?" He moved his head toward the blue Buick.

"No relation. Never saw her before."

"You know who she is?"

"Nope. I told you, I heard the shots while I was up at Mr. Monaco's place, got here as fast as I could. As you can see, it wasn't fast enough."

The deputy called Mike had walked up to us while I was speak-

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ing. When I mentioned again that I'd been at Monaco's house he and the sergeant exchanged quick looks.

Mike said, "No registration in the car. Her bag's open, bunch of junk spilled on the floor mat."

Torgesen nodded, looking at me. "You touch anything, Scott?"

"Not me. I looked inside the car, that's all."

"You saw the man who killed her?"

"I saw a man, and he must have been the killer. He took a bunch of shots at me, then scrammed over the hill."

"What did he look like?"

"Beats me. I got just a glimpse of his back when he took off. Guy in a dark suit, and that's it."

"What were you doing there?"

My client—that is, my client then—had stressed his desire that nobody know he was hiring an investigator. But I couldn't very well hold back that information now. So I said, "Mr. Monaco phoned me earlier this afternoon and asked me to meet him here before five o'clock—" I let it trail off, wondering why Monaco hadn't been there to greet me.

Torgesen was apparently thinking along the same lines. He said, "Mr. Monaco told you he'd be at his home until five?"

"That's what he said."

"You say the place was empty, right?"

"No. What I told you was that I found the door open and went inside. Before I could look around the place I heard the shots."

"The woman was at the door when you got there?"

"Yes. But she would hardly have had time to go in. I got there shortly after she did."

He chewed on his lower lip, jotted a line in his notebook. Torgesen glanced down Yucca Road. A white car was coming toward us. When it got closer I could see it was a new Lincoln Continental.

Still looking at it, Torgesen said to me, "You've got no idea where Mr. Monaco was when you were up there, huh?"

"No idea. I suppose he could have been in the house. That joint's big enough—"

"No, here he comes now," Torgesen said. "He always drives that big Connie."

The Continental slowed, then stopped as it drew abreast of us. I saw a man looking out, an expression that might have been alarm on his narrow tanned face. His eyes fell on me, and the white hair and brows, plus my size, must have told him something, but I couldn't tell from his expression if it was something he'd been eager to hear. Then he parked, stepped out of the car and walked toward us, and I was getting my first look at Ormand Monaco.

He was tall and had pretty good shoulders, but he looked unusually lean and elongated, as if he was

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originally half that size and had been stretched. He looked like a man with narrow bones covered by only a little flesh, and thin fat. But he was not a bad looking man. In fact, he possessed a rather cadaverous handsomeness, like a starving Basil Rathbone. He was wearing a pearl-gray suit, beautifully tailored, a soft white shirt, and gray tie with a knot in it the size of a bean.

He stopped before us, glanced at me and then turned to the sergeant. "It's Torgesen, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir."

"What's the matter here?"

"There's been a shooting, Mr. Monaco."

Without speaking Monaco stepped toward the Buick. Torgesen and I followed him.

I watched Monaco's face when he looked into the car, and his features twisted into angles of shock and dismay. He jerked his head back, just as I had done, but then looked again. After several seconds he swallowed, stepped back and turned away from the car.

"My God," he said. He started to say something to Torgesen, hesitated, then turned to me.

"Well, you've found her, Mr. Scott. That's Jeanne Jax."

IV

IT DIDN'T really surprise me. Maybe it should have.

Monaco explained briefly to Sergeant Torgesen that he had asked me here from Los Angeles to find the girl now dead in the car, and mentioned that she'd been missing, or at least not in evidence at the *Kubla Khan* for some time.

So, I figured it would be O.K. for me to ask a question or two. I said to Monaco, "Do you know why she wanted to see you?"

"See *me?* I don't understand." He seemed genuinely surprised. After a moment he glanced toward the car, then up Yucca Road. "She was coming back from my home, is that it?"

"Uh-huh. I was there, and saw her but she wasn't very communicative. I thought maybe you'd know what she wanted."

Torgesen had been standing silently next to us, rubbing a thick-fingered hand along the side of his chin. Quietly he asked, "Where were you, Mr. Monaco?"

"Where was I? Why, I merely went for a drive, Sergeant."

"Weren't you expecting Mr. Scott?"

Monaco flicked a glance at me. "Yes, I was."

"But you went for a drive." There was a little edge to Torgesen's tone.

Monaco got the point. Thin ridges of muscle bulged at the back of his jaws. Slowly he turned to gaze levelly at Torgesen. "Is there something wrong with that, Sergeant?" he said icily. "Does it disturb you?"

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"No, sir."

"I merely wanted to relax a little," Monaco continued. "The *Kubla Khan* opens to the public tomorrow, and I've arranged for a party tonight."

Torgesen said pleasantly, "But I'd still like to know where you were, Mr. Monaco. When you were driving for relaxation."

"I fail to see how that can possibly be of interest to you. However, I drove along Desert View, past the *Khan,* over some of the roads at the base of the mountains. Just driving and thinking."

"Would you mind coming down to the office with us, Mr. Monaco? Just to answer a few questions."

That one stuck me. The blunt "invitation" sounded a bit sticky.

Monaco pulled in a deep breath and blew the air out his nose. His lips thinned and he stuck his head forward toward Torgesen. "If you," he said crisply, "have assumed that I had anything to do with the death of Jeanne Jax—"

"I wasn't thinking about her," Jorgesen interrupted. "I wanted to ask you a couple questions about Sardis."

I blinked. By now, of course, I was all at sea. I wasn't even sure what he'd said, but it had sounded like "Sardis."

Ormand Monaco pulled a pack of cigarettes from his coat pocket and fumbled for a cigarette—and fumbled is the word. Apparently he intended to light up a smoke, casually draw upon it, and possibly blow smoke at Torgensen. But whatever he intended, I'm sure it wasn't what he did.

He flipped the pack to lift up a cigarette, but the movement was not very smooth. Two of the weeds fell out and dropped to the ground. Monoca started to grab for them, caught himself. "Ephrim?" he said.

Then he stooped, picked up the cigarettes, getting dirt on his fingers, put one of the smokes back and stuck the other between his lips. "What about Ephrim?" he said. He wiped his fingers on his trousers, leaving a faint smear on the iridescent gray cloth.

I felt almost sorry for him. I didn't know what the hell—or who—this Sardis was, or Ephrim, or whatever they were talking about. It was beyond doubt, however, that Monaco not only knew but was very close to flipping. When he lit the cigarette his hand trembled.

Torgensen didn't raise his voice or change his tone. "Uh-huh," he said. "Ephrim Sardis. You drove out to his place, didn't you, Mr. Monaco?"

"Certainly not!" It was a little too emphatic. "I may have driven by there, but— Yes, I believe I did drive along Ocotillo Lane. But I didn't call on Ephrim today."

"We got a report you were there—"

"Sergeant Torgensen, if I have to tell you again—"

For the first time the sergeant

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backtracked a little. Not much. "That you were in the vicinity," he said.

"Perhaps I did drive by the Sardis estate. What difference does it make? I fail to understand why, when a young girl has just been brutally killed, you insist on talking to me about Ephrim."

"He's dead."

"What?"

"He's dead. Somebody shot him."

Torgensen's eyes were on Monaco's face. His lids drooped, and he looked sleepy, but he wasn't.

Monaco gasped. "Dead? My God! Ephrim? But that's impossible. How? You say somebody shot him?"

"You didn't know he'd been killed?"

"Of course not. My God, Ephrim!"

Again, he overdid it. It was so bad I wondered for a moment if he was deliberately making himself look like a ham trying out at the community playhouse. One thing I did know: He was lying.

"Under the circumstances, then, you won't mind coming downtown?"

"Certainly not. I'll be glad to. I didn't understand before, Sergeant." He dragged on his cigarette, then dropped it and ground it beneath a rubber-soled gray shoe. When he looked up at Torgensen again he said, "I presume it is all right if I speak to Mr. Scott first."

"Okay."

Monaco strode across the street to his white sedan. When I stopped near him he looked at me and said, "This is a real clinker."

I didn't say anything. He wasn't exactly asking me, anyway. He took a long, slow breath and started talking, his words crisp and to the point. Monaco was practically at the opposite pole now from the man I'd seen fumbling with those cigarettes.

He puzzled me, but intrigued me as well. I could almost feel the power in the man. Yeah, I was thinking, Ormand Monaco was the kind of man who could build a hotel or a corporation. Or bore a hole through a mountain, or maybe through people, if he had to.

He said, "You know why I phoned you. Forget that. It is now more important that you determine who murdered Jeanne Jax. And Ephrim Sardis. And why. If you agree, go at once to the *Kubla Khan* and tell Jerry Vail what has happened. He is my assistant. Do not speak of this to anyone else. I'll pay double your usual fee, and a handsome bonus for results. All right?"

"Easy," I said. "Hell, I just got here, and bang, pow, boom, all of a sudden—"

"Make up your mind, Mr. Scott."

He was all charged up for sure. I wondered if he was going to float in the air. "A couple things first,

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Mr. Monaco. And a question or two. Sergeant Torgesen didn't actually say this Sardis was murdered."

"He said he was dead. That he was shot. He did not intimate that Ephrim shot himself."

"Okay. How did you know the dead girl was Jeanne Jax?"

He frowned, as if wondering what I meant. Then his face cleared. "I see. Yes, she was disfigured. At first I really wasn't sure. But it was she. Jeanne had a small mole beneath her left ear—which is visible now. There is a large topaz ring on the little finger of the dead girl's left hand, and I saw a similar ring on Jeanne Jax's hand. There is no question, that is Jeanne Jax in the car."

"Okay. Who in blazes is Ephrim Sardis?"

"He is—was—one of the wealthiest men in the country, certainly one of the half dozen richest men in California. He avoided publicity, but was active in a great many endeavors of much value to the state's economy. He contributed to political campaigns, to at least a hundred charities, and—"

He stopped and the taut flesh of his face seemed to sag a little. "He was a fine man," Monaco went on more slowly. "A few attacked him, charged him falsely with certain illegalities. But that was inevitable. He was a fine man, and he was my friend."

Then Monaco pulled his brows

down and looked at me. "I haven't time for a lengthy discussion of Ephrim. What is your usual fee?"

"Hundred a day, and I'll pay my own expenses. Unless there's something unusual—"

"Unusual?"

"Well, like if I sank a submarine or something."

"I'll pay double your usual fee." Monaco stopped suddenly, thought a moment. "No. Your usual fee. But I will pay you ten thousand dollars on one condition."

"Well, that sounds pretty. What condition?"

"That you have clarified this entire situation, removed any ridiculous suspicion from me personally, determined who killed Ephrim and

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Miss Jax—essentially that you have settled and solved everything by noon tomorrow."

"By noon tomorrow, huh? By—are you nuts?"

"Twelve noon, tomorrow. Saturday. For ten thousand dollars."

"Yeah, you're nuts."

"Yes or no, Scott."

"Yeah, sure. Why not? You've hired a detective. For ten thousand bucks."

"Be sure to tell Jerry Vail to contact our attorneys immediately. I'm well known here and doubt I'll be held for any length of time, but even ten minutes would be too much. It is important that I be at the *Khan* before eight tonight."

"I'll tell him." I pulled out a cigarette, remembering the way Monaco had sprayed his around, and said, "But why noon tomorrow?"

"Several reasons, Mr. Scott, most of which should be obvious to you if you are, as you allege, a detective. I do not enjoy having the Sergeant Torgesens of the world speak to me with sneers in their voices. And I cannot allow any scandal to become associated with me. It will be calamitous if, with dozens of reporters and television people even now present at the *Khan,* they should turn their energies and typewriters and cameras toward murder and foul deeds rather than the desirability of my hotel."

"I see."

"There is another important factor. The official ceremonies announcing the opening of the *Kubla Khan* will be held at noon tomorrow, Saturday. In addition to the usual newsmen and others I have mentioned, there will be present many very important personages whom I personally invited to attend. I should like to be in attendance, at my own hotel, for those ceremonies, myself." He paused. "Wouldn't you?"

"Sure," I said.

He opened the door of his Continental, climbed behind the wheel and waved a hand toward Sergeant Torgesen.

I leaned on the door and looked in at Monaco. "Something bothers me," I said.

"Oh?"

"Yeah. You were lying to Torgensen."

He was silent for a few seconds, eyes on my face. "Was I?"

"You sure weren't telling him all you know."

"I never tell all I know."

I sighed. "Okay. I'll give it a hundred percent, Mr. Monaco. But don't expect miracles." I shrugged, turned and walked across the street.

Sergeant Torgesen said, "You'll have to come down and sign a statement."

"Now?" I was starting to realize how few hours, even minutes, remained between now and tomorrow noon.

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"Should be now," Torgesen said.

"Look, I've got eighteen things to do in the next hour. I've told you everything I know. Can't the formal bit wait?"

He thought about it. "For a while. But don't forget about it, Scott. I wouldn't like it if you forgot."

"Any suspects?"

He smiled without joy. "Just one. So far."

"Anything you can tell me about him? Sardis, I mean."

"Not much. Big shot. Very big, loaded, millionaire several times over. Lots of VIP friends. There'll be plenty of pressure on this one." Torgesen paused. "Anything else you'd like to know, Scott? Like how much I make a month? Or—"

I grinned. "That's good enough. For now. And thanks."

I started for my Cad and Torgesen said, "You've got a flat tire."

"The hell."

He smiled again, with more joy this time. "I looked over your car while you were jawing with Mr. Monaco. Somebody shot at you, all right. Hit your right front."

I looked, swore, then headed for the trunk and my spare.

A few minutes later, sweating, with a sore left hand and two newly skinned knuckles, I leaned against the Cad's fender, gripping a lug wrench and thinking.

I had a new client, and was on a new case, and so far everything was simply dandy. The gal I'd originally been hired to find was dead, killed virtually in front of my eyes; I'd been shot at, I didn't have any idea who'd shot at me; some guy named Sardis, whom I'd never heard of before, had been murdered; I'd just had the fun of changing a tire; and my client was headed for the can.

And that was good, I told myself. Because things would *have* to improve pretty soon.

V

I'D PUT THE tools and ruined tire into the trunk and was about to get behind the Cad's wheel when I saw Mike sliding down the side of Moss Mountain, holding something in one hand. Monaco was still waiting in his car, but he'd turned the engine off.

Mike walked up to Torgesen who was standing next to the Buick, so I sauntered over as he said, "Found these on the hillside, Torg. One almost at the top, other two down near here. Nothing else. No cartridge cases or nothing."

He gave the sergeant three crisp, new-looking hundred-dollar bills. Torgesen looked at them. "Maybe that's why her bag was yanked open. Doesn't smell like a robbery to me, though."

I said, "Any money left in her bag, Sergeant?"

He looked around. "You still here?" He seemed to be considering whether to answer or not, but

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finally said, "No, just loose silver. No identification, either. Way you told it, there were two shots, then a third. How much time till that third shot, would you say?"

"Oh, I'd guess a minute, maybe." I knew what was going through his mind, so I said, "Time enough for the guy to run up, dig inside the bag—and put that third big one into her head."

He nodded.

I looked inside the Buick. I'd noticed there was no registration slip on the post. I said to Torgesen, "No sign of the registration any place?"

He shook his head. "I thought you were in a hurry, Scott."

I grinned. "That I am," I said, and left.

I PARKED at the end of the smooth black drive, before the entrance to the *Kubla Khan,* and a young guy in red trousers and a blue jacket took my bags, gave them to another young guy in white trousers and a gold coat, and drove off with the Cad.

I followed the gold-coated bellhop inside.

A dark carpet with a dizzying Oriental design woven into it covered the floor to a depth of what felt like about a foot, and the chairs and divans in the lobby were massive, heavy, made of ornate carved dark wood. Soft music whispered from hidden speakers. On the walls were oil paintings with lots of reds and blues and greens.

On my left was a wide doorway with its top curving up to a pointed peak like an Indian temple, and intricately graceful letters which spilled out something every pretty but unintelligible.

In English, below the pretty letters, it said *Seraglio.*

I knew what that meant. It meant a harem. I'm not so dumb. Not when it comes to harems. But the place looked like a bar, and that struck me as a brilliant idea, combining a bar with a harem.

At the desk I asked for Jerry Vail, but the prince—or possibly emperor—behind the counter didn't know where Mr. Vail was. He would, however, page him.

I said my name was Shell Scott and I would be in the bar, gave the bellhop a couple bucks and asked him to leave the bags in my room, then walked toward the *Seraglio.*

Thirty or forty people sat or moved about in the lobby, several of them already in costume. It was enough to bring sight to the blind. Gals in Persian bloomers, gals in Indian saris, gals with bare midriffs—I counted three navels—and gals in things like wispy pajama-bottoms below, and clever thimble-sized bras above. There were several dashingly-clad guys, too—but about those women.

I could not recall ever seeing at one time and in one place so many *gorgeous* tomatoes. Clearly many

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of them must have been the cream of the crop of the country-wide contests, culminating with the finals tomorrow here at the *Kubla Khan*.

They came in all three primary colors, blonde, brunette and redhead, but each and every lovable one came equipped with all the vital equipment, all and a little bit more.

Wrapped in thoughts of eyeballing navels and thimbled-sized bras and all the rest of that orgy, I had not been watching where I was going. I'd been headed toward the *Seraglio*—at least that's where my feet were headed, but my head had been swiveling every direction but up. So I ran into somebody.

I swiveled my head around and said, "Excuse me, I'm sssss—"

God in Heaven, I thought. I *must* be dead. Here's one of the angels.

I had seen deep purple and swirls of lavender in the lobby of the *Kubla Khan*. Now I was seeing it again. But different, incredibly different. It was the deep purple

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of mountain shadows and the lavender of desert blooms, the hush of Autumn evenings with the warmth of summer moonlight, and it was all in a woman's eyes. Enormous, melting eyes, black-fringed, clear and bright. And startled.

She blinked slowly. Then she said, "I tried to get out of your way. But there's a lot of you to get out of the way of."

"A man could damn near die in your eyes," I said.

"What?"

"Ah, I'm sorry—that's not what I meant to say. It's probably because I was thinking about death a moment ago. Doesn't sound much fun, does it?"

She shook her head slightly.

"If you'll let me keep trying," I said, "I'll come up with something more sensible in a minute."

She laughed. "I *hope* so."

"Let's change the subject. You must be here to win the beauty contest. Well, my name is Shell Scott and I'm a judge. A judge, get it? I've got power! Pow—"

"I'm a judge myself."

"*You're* a judge?"

"Yes."

"Well, that fixes that. Maybe there's some other way I can, ah, help you."

"Shell Scott. Of course. I know you. You're from Los Angeles, aren't you?"

"Uh-huh. L.A.-Hollywood."

"So am I. From Hollywood, I mean."

"What's your name?"

"Misty." It sounded right for her. When she said it her voice was dark and rustled like lace. "Misty Lombard."

Misty Lombard. I knew the name. Who—hey, boy I thought. It was only a name known to perhaps half of the earth's population. Misty Lombard, one of Hollywood's most famous and brilliantly shining lights. Star of films, guest-shotter on television, magazine-cover marvel. I'd heard that the natives even had one of her brassieres nailed to a tree trunk in Benzabiland; they did wild dances around it every full moon.

She was wearing some kind of simple white-knit suit, but not even a suit could hide the famous curves, the swelling breasts and celebrated hips and ridiculously small waistline. Her hair was thick and dark, the color of roasted chestnuts, and her lips looked sweet, and tender, and moist, as if they could have roasted the chestnuts.

"Just my luck," I said.

"What do you mean?"

"I was going to spirit you away from here and lock you in a cave. Or a tower or something—like Rapunzel, say. And visit you every evening, carrying a hairy ladder. But Misty Lombard, it wouldn't work. Ten thousand guys would kill me."

She stopped rolled her eyes, pursed her lips, as if thinking. It fascinated me.

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"Never mind. I'm going to go out and find a cave. How about dinner first?"

"I'm sorry. I'd like to, really I would. But I have to get ready for the party."

"Party? Oh, yeah." It was coming back to me. "Maybe later we could—"

"Let's wait and see. I'm going to the party with Mr. Leaf. He may get tied up during the evening. I don't know. He often does."

"Simon Leaf?"

She nodded. So she was going to be with the producer. Fooey to him. But that was right, Misty had starred in a couple of his pictures. A couple of his *good* pictures.

"I do have to run," she said.

"All right. But don't be surprised if you see me several times. Like, well, every time you look around."

" 'Bye, Mr. Scott. It was nice—" she smiled brilliantly—"running into you."

"Just in case," I said, "save me a dance." I grinned at her and added, "In the moonlight."

Then I went into the *Seraglio.* For a drink.

VI

IF MY EYES hadn't already been in a state of shock from looking at Misty Lombard, my first sight of the *Seraglio* might have sent them into it. The place was beautiful.

I had to part a colorful curtain of hanging glass beads to step inside, and then I stood for a few seconds letting my vision adjust to the dimness. There was some illumination from several big pierced-metal lamps probably from India or Persia, but the rest came from small lamps on low tables. At first I thought they were candles, but closer inspection showed them to be small oil-burning lamps like some I'd once seen from Bombay.

On my right was a long bar and across the wide room, behind thin and almost transparent draperies, were several softly-lighted booths in which I could see the veiled figures of men and women drinking and talking.

The place was more than half filled, most of the customers in costume, and I could hear the subdued rumble of conversation. In my nostrils was a faint blend of liquor, perfume and powder, the scent of lotions and spices.

The *Seraglio* was not merely beautiful, it was warm, exciting, stimulating—well, let's say it right out, it was sexy as hell. I liked it a lot.

I walked to the long bar and slid onto the first empty stool I came to.

It thought the bartender was going to dance up to me doing pirouettes, he was so fluttery and peaches-and-creamy, but he merely tripped over and said, "Yay-

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yus?" I guessed he was from the South. South Mars, judging by his garish costume.

"Bourbon and water."

"You just bet you."

"Oh, come on, you-all," I said. He was laying it on thicker than they made it.

"But wouldn't you-all rather have one of our *speyshuls?*" he asked, so cutely it was hard to resist him.

"What in the hell is a *speyshul?*"

"One of our *speyshul* drinks." He flitted away and danced back with a small brightly-colored folder.

It was a drink menu listing maybe fifty concoctions, ranging from a Kismet to the Istanbul to the Hooghly River. That last one ought to be a wow, I thought.

I said, "Oh, hell. Bring me anything. Just so I can lift it."

"I'd like to suggest a Cobra's Kiss," he said.

"Go ahead."

"Is that what y'all want?"

"What's in it?"

"It's made from a secret Indian formula."

"Okay." I shrugged. "What the hell. When in India, do as the Hindu. Now, what's really in a Cobra's Kiss?"

"Lots and lots of *booze.*" He gave me a grin and began swiftly mixing the drink, using about nine bottles.

I started eyeing the drink menu, feeling a suspicion. What ever he was doing would probably cost me about a pound. There it was. Cobra's Kiss. It was four dollars and ninety-five cents, and I thought: The damn thing had *better* have lots and lots of booze in it.

I got busy with my Cobra's Kiss, which seemed to have a lot of hollow fangs in it. I was really looking forward to the beauty contest here. And even to the "Talent" segment, believe it or not, because this time there was a sensible *reason* for it.

Since the winner was to be guaranteed a leading role in Simon Leaf's upcoming TV series and some of the runners-up would probably get roles which could be boosts up the showbiz ladder, the talent segment was to be either a reading or some kind of dramatic performance which would allow viewing producers and directors and such to determine if a contestant possessed at least embryo acting ability, which could be nourished, and which might grow. Even so, the prime focus would still be on beauty, bazooms, behinds, and sex appeal, rather than a gal's unique to twirl sixteen times on one toe, barefooted.

So my thoughts went. And in the middle of them I became aware that I'd slid onto a stool next to yet another exceptionally good looking gal. It was too much. They were all over the place. It was like tossing a drunk into a vat of Vat 69. This one, though older than

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the lovelies who would be parading and emoting tomorrow, could hold her own with most of them.

I guessed she was about my age, thirty, with a lot of black hair pulled tightly away from her forehead and tied with a ribbon at the back of her neck. Her skin was dark, almost olive, and she appeared to have a marvelous profile clear down to her kneecaps. Unusually long lashes fringed her eyes, the nose was straight, cheekbones high and prominent, the mouth sensual and almost cruel.

Also high, prominent, and sensual, but exuding an aura of kindness and true compassion rather than cruelty, were her very interesting breasts. I use the word "interesting" rather than something like "restless," or "apparently gas-filled, and rising" because they were real, for a change.

She was wearing some kind of gypsy outfit, a very loose and low-cut blouse, gold-mesh belt and a colorful skirt. A row of bracelets was on her left wrist, and a huge glittery ring, so big I figured it had to be a rhinestone, was on the third finger of her left hand.

She took the last sip of what looked like a champagne cocktail, pushed her empty glass across the bar and waited. Then she got out a cigarette, and quick as a flash I had my lighter out, burning, and all ready for her, like a real jerk.

She turned her head and looked at me from chilly, slanted eyes, ignored my flame, pushed the button on a small gold lighter with more rhinestones in it, and lit her cigarette.

"Hi," I said. But I put my lighter away. I know when not to overdo a thing. I think.

She let smoke drift out her nose while gazing at me with the warmth of a wounded antelope greeting a pack of hyenas. She was looking me up and down, wrinkling her nose. Not much, just enough so I could see it wrinkle.

For the first time I remembered that—after charging around in the desert and stirring up dust and such and changing a tire—I had come straight to the bar without "freshening up" in my room. Consequently I suppose I did look a little wilted. Still, she didn't have to wrinkle her sharp old nose like that. Why, I use a deodorant advertised on TV as "Stronger than Sweat."

"What are you?" she asked when she condescended to speak. "A truck driver? Or are you, perhaps—"

"Never mind," I said. "I've heard them all, ma'am. Truck driver, garbage man, hot-dog salesman. We all have our little cross to bear. What are you, the Queen of the May?"

Fooey to her, I thought. Her and her jazzy blouse. Probably she wakes up mooing every morning. Hell, I only wanted to light her cigarette. Well, maybe that's not

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quite the whole truth, I told myself. But how could she know?

I was sitting there, kind of chewing my teeth, when a great big tall handsome guy came in and glided toward us as if walking on water. Golden blond waves on his skull, head held high, profile cleaving the air like the bow of a Viking's twenty-oared war barge, broad shoulders and narrow waist, looking like a man who had never perspired in his whole life.

He walked straight up to the bosomy Mongol and leaned down, twitching his ruby lips fetchingly, and I thought in some alarm, "You'd better not, old buddy; you don't know her like I do." But he merely pecked her on the cheek.

"Hello, darling," she said.

Apparently he knew her better than I did.

"What took you so long?"

"I couldn't find my shorts."

Apparently he knew her *lots* better than I did.

"Oh, Jerry," she said, "they're right where they always are."

Believe me, it was a sickening conversation. And it got more so. He dropped his voice, but not so far down I couldn't hear him. "I saw you jawing with this big creep next to you. He giving you any trouble, Neyra?"

"Yes," she said. "Did you notice how dirty his hands are? He must work in a garage."

"His hands? He—he didn't put 'em *on* you, did he?"

The guy actually leaned over and looked down at her pretties, as though to discover whether my greasy, toil-worn hands had left any grime on them.

"Goodness, no!" she cried. "One thing I do have, darling, is taste."

"Ah, of course, sweet. Leave it to me. I'll set the creep straight."

I was studying my glass—my empty glass—when he stepped over and tapped me on the shoulder. I looked around at him. "Yes?"

He had what I imagine he fondly assumed was a fierce look on his face. "The lady on your right," he said grandly, "is my wife."

"Uh-huh."

"I feel I should inform you that she finds your attentions unpleasant, and *I* find them unwarranted."

"Yeah. Sorry. Hell, all I said to her was 'Hi.' Well, that's practically all—"

"And I insist you stop annoying her," he continued, peeking to his right to make sure his wife was drinking it all in.

"It's a deal," I said. Big deal, I thought. How was I to know she was his wife?

But he just wouldn't leave it alone.

"I absolutely insist," he said sternly, "that you refrain from bothering her further."

"Don't worry about it. I'd rather walk barefooted through broken glass." This boy was beginning to nettle me a little.

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He was actually getting steamed up. "Why, you big-mouthed baboon," he said. "You—"

"Hold it, friend. Let's not start calling each other names. This whole bit is ridiculous enough already."

"Ridic—"

"Ridiculous and childish," I said, getting a little heated myself. "All I did was try to light your wife's cigarette, but she acted like I'd set fire to her pants. If you want the truth, I think she's just *mean* and—"

He stuck a hand forward and grabbed my arm.

That did it.

One of my little idiosyncrasies is a large distaste for guys grabbing me. I felt the heat rising and tried unsuccessfully to tamp it down, while he tugged at me, finding me perhaps a bit more difficult to tug than he had anticipated.

I pulled his paw off my arm and, hotter than I should have been, said, "Okay, since you obviously are hungering not for facts but for the horrible truth, here it is: What happened is, I saw her chest lying on the bar and started to pick it up, thinking it was an Angel-food cake, made with eight dozen eggs. She said, 'Will you please—' "

He stuck out that paw again and started to grab me, and I flipped a hand up between us and said, "Don't do it," and meant it.

The back of my hand was toward him, about six inches from his chops, and he looked at it for quite a while. It is scarred somewhat, and the knuckles are kind of lumpy, from hitting guys. He looked at it with some interest.

I said, "There's one little thing. I heard your wife call you Jerry. Before I pop you, I'd like to be sure your last name isn't Vail. It wouldn't be, would it?"

"Vail?" Of course. How did you know my name? Have you and my wife—"

"Oh, knock it off. Jerry Vail. I'm Shell Scott." I sighed. "We're going to be great friends."

"You're Scott?" Suddenly he was all smiles. "Why, hell, Ormond told me to expect you. I just got word you were here." He stuck out his hand, but this time to shake mine.

Then he looked at his wife, beaming. Neyra, this is Mr. Scott. Shell Scott.

Neyra simply couldn't have cared less. It wasn't Okay with her. Nothing was Okay with her. She shrugged and her gypsy blouse almost fell off, and she said, "So?"

Jerry Vail lowered his voice and said to me, "I'm glad you're here, Scott. The girl—you know—still hadn't shown up. You do know what I mean, don't you? Ormond filled you in?"

"Yeah. Now let me fill you in. The girl isn't going to show up. And you've got to get on your horse—"

"Not going to show up?"

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I looked around. The guy on my left was leaning way over toward a lass dressed as a harem cutey, either talking to her or about to nibble on her, so nobody was going to overhear us.

I lowered my voice and said, "The most important thing right now is that your boss is in the clink. The law—"

"Clink?"

"Yeah, the sheriff's slammer in Indio. Jail. Probably not locked up, just being questioned, but very unhappy."

"What in God's name is Ormond doing in jail?"

"Trying to get out, undoubtedly. Which is what you're supposed to arrange ten minutes ago."

"But what happened? Why the devil is he—"

"The girl, Jeanne, isn't going to show up because she's dead. Somebody shot her."

Vail gasped and started to let words bubble at me, but I kept going. "I don't see how the deputies can connect him with the girl's death—I was near the spot myself when it happened—but they want to talk to him about some guy named Sardis. It seems—"

"Who?"

"Sardis. Ephrim Sardis. It seems somebody killed him too and the sheriff's boys want to talk—"

"Killed? Somebody killed Ephrim Sardis?" His eyes were very wide.

I said slowly, "Yeah. I guess it just happened. I don't know beans about—"

I never did finish.

Neyra let out a soft whispering sound, slid off the stool, stood up straight, and screamed like a bird. Her eyes rolled until only the whites showed. Then she fainted. in a heap.

VII

VAIL WASN'T quick enough to catch her. Neither was I.

It got very quiet in the *Seraglio*. Everybody was looking this way.

Vail kneeled by his wife and grabbed her hands. Then he looked back up at me, his face twisted.

"You imbecile!" he said harshly. "My wife is—was—Neyra Sardis. Ephrim's daughter."

I opened my mouth, and shut it. What could I say? Maybe if Mrs. Vail had been not quite so uncommunicative she'd have been spared the shock.

In a minute or two Neyra was sitting up, blinking groggily. Vail and I led her out of the *Seraglio* between us, across the lobby and into Vail's large, mahogany-pannelled office. He found some brandy in a cleverly concealed bar that swung out from the end of his desk, and gave his wife a healthy shot of it. She took the glass and sipped, eyes blank with shock.

Vail spoke to her softly, then stood up and walked across the

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room to me. "I'll have to take Neyra home," he said.

"Of course."

"It's a terrible thing." He added nervously, "Bad enough as it is, but she's pregnant." I could more easily understand his almost shattered look. The production of babies not only mystifies but sort of terrifies most men, so they all tell me.

"Four months along," Vail went on. "I hope this—I hope it doesn't —" He let it trail off, squeezing the fingers of one hand in the other.

"She'll be all right," I said, just as though I knew what I was talking about. Then I lit a cigarette and went on, "Look, Mr. Vail, I don't like dwelling on this, but I have to mention a couple other things. You're supposed to call all the attorneys in California, if that's necessary, to get Monaco released. And nobody's supposed to know what I've told you, except us."

He nodded, then looked at me, blinking. "What happened? How did it happen?"

I told him what little I knew about the two murders.

When I'd finished he said, "Shot. God, who would shoot him?"

"That's one of the things I wanted to ask you. Do you have any idea who might have done it?"

He shook his head. "It's fantastic. He hardly ever left the house, except on business. He didn't—mingle much."

"The house is on Ocotillo Lane?"

"Yes. It's a large estate. He lives in the big house, Neyra and I have one of the cottages."

"Were you on the estate this afternoon?"

"I've been here at the hotel. Preparing for the party. Well, that's a mess, too." He bit his lips, then went on, "Neyra spent the afternoon shopping in the Springs, then came straight here. We've a cottage here at the *Khan,* too. I was to meet her in the *Seraglio*—well, you know that."

"Just one other thing. Can you think of any connection between Mr. Sardis' death and the murder of the girl?"

"The girl? Oh, Miss Jax. No, there can't be any."

"You know Mr. Sardis pretty well, I guess."

"Yes, of course." He stopped. "Well, actually, only since Neyra and I were married, early this year. I only met Ephrim a month or so before then. Even so, I swear I don't know of a single real enemy he had. It's just fantastic," he repeated. Then he said, "I do have to go," and walked to his wife, helped her to her feet.

"Say I meet you back in the *Seraglio,* then. In about half an hour?"

"Fine. I'll wait for you there."

Twenty minutes later I was in my room, admiring myself in a full-length mirror.

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My, I looked just splendid, I thought. I was showered and shaved, brilliantly clad in the outfit I'd rented in Hollywood. It consisted of a well-fitted scarlet jacket that buttoned high around my neck and extended clear down around my hips, silver buttons on its front inserted in intricately woven loops of glistening silver cord, white trousers with keen red stripes down the outsides, and a white turban.

The outfit—except for the turban—was a lot like those which Aly Khan used to wear, only I had lots of medals on mine. The costumer had thrown them in for a couple of extra bucks. I looked like a guy who had saved an entire nation.

With the turban topping it all off, I very much resembled a real maharajah, I thought. Except for the face, of course. Not much I could do about that. My Colt Special bulged entirely too much under the jacket, so I left the clamshell holster in a drawer and put the gun in my pants pocket, where the bottom flare of the jacket concealed it. All set.

I headed for the *Seraglio* again.

Ten minutes later I was still waiting for Vail, and sipping my third Cobra's Kiss of the evening. They seemed to be using king-sized Cobras in them, and I decided perhaps I'd better go easy on the venom for a while.

I was, however, feeling fine. I'd seen plenty of lusciousness, and had even been on the receiving end of a few lingering glances and a smile or two, which smoothed some of the dents out of my Nayra-battered ego, but I had decided to play it smart.

Too many things had gone wrong so far, either a little wrong or a lot. First, my failing to meet Monaco, or vice versa; and then the ugly death of Jeanne. Even Misty, dandy as those few moments with her had been, was unavailable at least for the moment and possibly for the entire night. Neyra, well, that had been reasonably close to catastrophe. Two murders already. It was enough. I'd play it smart from here on in.

Only . . .

I had that creepy feeling along my spine, anyhow.

It creeps up on me occasionally,

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a little nagging twitch prowling among the vertebrae, and up to no good. That creepy feeling along your spine is a something giving you warning. "It's raining, brother; you go outside and you're gonna get wet."

I don't know; maybe there are umbrellas.

At any rate, I had my plan and resolution. I was going to be a good fellow, and thus let trouble pass me by. Except . . .

Except something more than a little distracting was going on. Naturally, here in the *Kubla Khan* and on this Friday night, another woman was involved.

She was one of the cutest little tomatoes I'd seen in a month of Sundays, too. Black hair cut short, with feathery fringes dangling down in artful disarray on her forehead, big round eyes with a constant look of surprise in them, eyes as dark and sweet as chocolate pudding, and a soft-looking mouth that would attract bees.

She was sitting alone at a table directly behind me and only a few feet away. I'd glanced at her in the bar mirror a time or two, which is how I happened to note the peculiar circumstance. She was drinking, not smoking, but every once in a while there appeared a lot of smoke around her head. A couple of times I saw her wrinkle her nose —not like Neyra—as if the smoke or its odor was highly distasteful to her.

And no wonder. It was cigar smoke.

Two men sat at a table next to her. One of them, a big, beefy character about forty years old, was the cigar smoker. He was one of the thick boys, heavy in the shoulders and chest, with a barrel-shaped stomach that looked hard. He sat with one leg stuck out and his pants leg was pulled tight around a thigh like a horse's neck.

He sucked in a big mouthful of smoke, made an O of his lips, and blew more smoke at the little girl.

There wasn't anything accidental about it. He was deliberately squirting the stuff at her. Maybe he thought he had a reason—she was a colored tomato. It started to burn me more than a little, but I tried to cool off it by pouring some more booze down my gullet. It was none of my business.

I stared past the barman, letting my lower lip droop. I was looking in the mirror when the little gal with the sweet-pudding eyes and the bee-witching mouth waved a hand vigorously in front of her nose, then turned to face the big guy.

I heard her say pleasantly, "I beg your pardon. Would you mind not doing that? It's starting to—"

Still leaning back in his chair, fat leg stuck out, and holding the glowing cigar between thumb and finger, he said casually, "It bother you, girlie? Well, you don't like it you can leave. It's a free country."

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One of those, huh? I thought. I told myself to sit tight, not to get involved, not to make an ass of myself—again.

I sat quite still while my face got warm and a little perspiration grew on my upper lip. I knew part of the reason for the perhaps over-energetic conniptions of my various glands was undoubtedly due to the contrast between what the beefy slob had said and the way he'd said it.

The gal turned around, hitched her chair closer to the table. Boy, was she burning.

She was wearing a pale blue cocktail gown instead of a costume, and it was cut low over high breasts, plunging just deep enough into that dark shadowed valley, and as she breathed deeply her breasts rose and fell with a rapid, sensual, rhythmic semi-bareness.

Then she snapped her head around. I couldn't figure what she was looking for. But I did when she found it. She wanted a waitress, and got one—they all wore yellow see-through ankle-length bloomers and metallic bras with golden snakes woven around the cups, probably meant to represent the death of Cleopatra twice—and when the waitress stopped alongside her the little lovely ordered another drink.

I grinned. Apparently she was going to sit right there, smoke and all, even if she choked. It pleased me.

She got her drink, lifted it to her lips and was just starting to swallow when the slob got another lungful and actually leaned half out of his chair this time, so he could get near her head when he blew. She got a nose-full, I guess; something happened. She actually did start to choke for a few seconds, apparently from the combination of liquor in her throat and cigar smoke in her nostrils.

She coughed, lowered her head and put a hand to her mouth, coughed against it again and once again, shoulders shaking. I told myself weakly, "Don't do it, Scott," as I climbed down off my stool and did it.

Three long steps got me there. I put my left hand high on his chest, just under the thick neck, and pushed him back solid on his seat. He was caught by surprise and wasn't difficult to move, but when his rear end hit the chair he yanked his head up and looked at me and said, "Wha—"

I took the cigar from his fingers, picked up his glass, and dunked the cigar in the beer. It went *psst*, and bubbled a little. Then I put the glass back on the table, handed him the cigar, and stood there.

"You son—" he said.

"Ah-ah, careful. I'm just uneasy now. Don't get me all unstrung."

"What—" He stopped and thought about it. Then he started to get up. Then he stopped and

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thought about that, too. Finally he said, "What the hell you do that for?"

I grinned at him. "It's a free country."

I waited. After appearing to chew on something gristly he looked across the table at his companion and said, "All the nuts are out tonight, huh?"

I turned around and went back to my stool.

A couple minutes later I saw the big guy and his friend go out into the lobby.

A minute after that, while glowering at my drink, not feeling all filled with joy and light, either, I heard a voice near my ear, a voice like the humming of honey, like hot winds in green grass, soft as the flutter of mascaraed lashes, warm as a Martini in an empty stomach.

And all it said was, "Hi."

VIII

YOU THINK she'd looked good six or eight feet away? Let me tell, you, that had been seeing as through a glass darkly.

Up close she was all velvet and fire, skin like silken umber, the eyes still dark and almost brown, but with green in them, a lot of green, the color of wet moss, or the sea, or emeralds in shadow. They were big and round and that look of constant surprise in them gave her an air of virginal innocence—when you looked at her eyes. But a breath below was where the virgin died and a bawd was born.

Those lips were the flesh of a hot, carnivorous blossom, a trap and a snare made for a man's mouth. Lips that were fine and moist and full, that looked soft and sweet and willing in a face that was wanton and wise. You don't think so? Friend, you should have been there.

"There" was with your face about six inches from hers. I leaned just a little close and, still grinning, said, "That is Hi, I presume, as in hi-diddle-diddle?"

"Like in hi-de-ho, honey."

"Well, crazy. You have just destroyed three thousand of my corpuscles."

"That is a bloody shame," she said.

"Lady," I said, starting to get the rhythm, "you're more fun than a hot transfusion, you're really plasma. I think we could swing, if I knew the music."

She was starting to smile more widely, more hotly, and once or twice she snapped her fingers.

"Lady, you make me feel like a little kid again."

"You're a liar, Daddy. I mean —" She smiled like Lucrezia Borgia stirring the soup, and said, "I *mean*, you is a *liah*, big daddy." And this time she lowered her voice and kind of got it squeezed in her throat, and something in the sound as the words rasped softly

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through her lips sent a kind of three-dimensional electrocution into me about midway of the midsection, and it spread out from there and activated every switch I had.

I gulped and said, "If you say so."

"By the way," she said. "Thanks. For puttin' out old Smokey Bear." She looked me up and down, from my gorgeous turban to my marvelous red jacket and hero medals, to my dandy striped pants, and said, "My, you're pretty. What are you, a fireman?"

"Huh," I said stiffly. "Huh. Any fool can see that I am a maharajah."

"A what?"

"A *maharajah!*"

She leaned forward; her breasts touched my chest. I looked down at them swelling against the neckline of her dress, straining against the blue cloth as if impatient with even that fragile restraint. I hoped she didn't scratch them.

She leaned even closer and those freedom-loving breasts bulged over the blue neckline, quivered, started to spill, and I said, "Baby, you're melting my medals. Let's—let's have a great big drink."

I spotted the bartender, held up two fingers, pointed at the bar. He nodded, but I thought he looked panicky, as though becoming certain he should never have mentioned Cobra's Kisses to me in the first place.

When the drinks arrived my new and zippy companion gazed upon them intently, and those big, round, surprised-looking eyes became even bigger and rounder and more surprised-looking, and she said, "Have you been drinking *those?*"

"Of course. But this is only my fifth."

"You've had five?"

"Well, yes, about a fifth. But don't worry, I hold my drinks pretty well." I pressed two fingers against each eye for a moment, adding, "When I'm sober, especially."

Then I said, "I think I'd better sit down. And get my wind back. Watch it there. I think we'd better *both* sit down."

The innocent eyes rolled around. "Only one stool," she said.

"So it's yours, all yours. Unless you want to sit on my lap."

She smiled again, like Lucrezia along about the third course this time. "I might," she said, "only I'm not wearing a girdle. So I can't do *that.*" She slid up onto the stool with a motion as fluid as two ball bearings rubbing together in a quart of peanut oil.

"No girdle?" I said in a voice ringing with joy. "No bachelor girl's friend? No enemy of mankind?"

"You mean we're—I *mean,* you mean we *is* in accord?"

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I got a boot out of the way she switched from the smooth, almost litting language she ordinarily used into the calculated lingo, with a rocking bounce and beat. She probably knew eight languages more than I did.

I said, "We is, for a fact. It so happens I am a charter anti-girdler. If I had my way I'd burn them entirely. So, dear Sweetpants—say, what the hell *is* your name?"

She laughed, the smooth brown column of her throat rippling. Then she lowered her head and looked up at me from the chaste, sparkling eyes. "It's Miss Weldon. And it's *Miss* Weldon. And it's Lyssa. So who am I?"

"You're Lyssa, what else?"

"And you're what else?"

"Shell Scott."

"What are you doing here, Shell Scott? You one of the big important guests?"

"Nope. I'm a det—" I cut it off just in time. "I'm one of the judges of tomorrow's beauty contest."

"Ooh," she squealed. "Vote for me, vote for me."

"You're in the contest?"

"You just bet I am."

Now that I was actually talking to one of the contestants, I took the opportunity to ask, "You know any of the other girls in the contest, Lyssa?"

"I know them all. Met them all, I mean."

"How about Jeanne Jax?"

"Sure, she's a real pretty—" Lyssa stopped suddenly. "Funny you'd ask me about her."

"Why funny?"

"She was supposed to be staying with Carol, another of the girls in the contest—Carol Shearing. But Carol says she didn't come back to their room last night. Isn't that funny?"

"Yeah."

"And, besides, she was asking me a lot of questions yesterday. I think she asked some of the other girls, too."

"Oh? Asked about what?"

"What we knew about this bigshot, Mr. Sardis."

I felt a little electric current ripple the hairs on my ears. "Sardis?" I said casually. "Ephrim Sardis?"

"Uh-huh. You know him?"

"Never met the man," I said truthfully. "But I've heard of him. What did she want to know about Sardis?"

"Oh, like who he was, where he lived, if he was as rich as everybody said, things like that."

"So what did you tell her?"

"I told her I didn't know much about him, but if she was so curious, ask Bull Harper."

"Who's Bull Harper?"

She frowned. "What are *you* so curious about all of a sudden?"

"Curious fellow. So who's this Bull?"

"He's a friend of mine, if you want to know. A *good* friend. He doesn't ask me all kinds of goofy questions."

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So I grinned and said, "Well, then, let's go back to where we were *at*. Ah, so you're Lyssa Weldon? Well, I'm Shell Scott. How about that?"

It was as if she'd never been away. She snapped her fingers and said, "Crazy. And you are the craziest looking man. You shuah is, you shu-wah *is*."

"Ah, but underneath this rough exterior is an interior."

"I like it all right," she said casually, "way it is on the outerside."

"Then we *is* in accord. Because I have been—in case you'd not noticed—so admiring your outerside that I may soon be off-side. That is, if you are truly wise enough, and brave enough, not to be wearing a girdle."

"Feel."

"Huh?"

She reached for my wrist, pulled, put my hand on the curve of her hip, moved it down the smooth roundness of her thigh. She was warm; I could feel the heat of the body, like boiling racing blood under my fingertips. And she was right, there was nothing under the dress but Lyssa. The thin cloth felt like her skin.

Something across the room caught her eye and held it for long seconds, then she looked back at me again. She ran her tongue over her lips and said, "I thought shuwah old Smokey Bear was going to hit you down in the ground."

"I was kind of afraid he might have something like that on his mind."

"Think he could've? Could've done it?"

"I don't know. It isn't likely, but you never know. He might have."

"You pretty good, like in a real fight?"

"Pretty good. Why, what the hell? What difference does it make to you."

"Not me," she said, kind of sadly, I thought. "Might make a difference to you."

"How's that?"

She looked once more toward whatever it was that had caught her eye and said, back to the normal language again, "I hope you're not merely pretty good, Shell. You'd better be better than that."

I had a feeling something was going to happen. I looked around.

The first thing I saw was Jerry Vail, back at last.

But that wasn't it.

There was it, in the doorway.

It was just about the biggest blackest man I'd seen in my life. He was *enor*mous.

I knew Vail was my height, six-two, but this guy was a good three inches taller than Vail and I'd have given splendid odds he weighed not an ounce less than a thousand pounds. Well, a solid two hundred and eighty pounds, at least.

He looked big, he looked tough he looked dangerous as hell. But mainly, he looked at me.

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"Lyssa," I hissed. "Lyssa doll, what is *that?*"

"That's Bull. My boy friend."

"You call that a boy?"

The subject of this jollity was staring straight at Lyssa and me, his mouth working a little, and his eyes appearing, at least from my disadvantage point, to be flashing red lights, and it did not help a bit that I, like the number-one champeen sap of all the world, was still standing there clutching Lyssa's friendly rear end.

Jerry Vail was standing in front of the human tank but the big ape didn't go around, he just walked straight ahead. His shoulders hit Vail and Jerry simply spun in the air, staggered, and banged into a table.

"He's mad," Lyssa said.

So here I stood: out in the rain, with no umbrella.

IX

BULL STOPPED a foot away and stared at me. Then he cranked his big head around toward my new girl.

"Lyssa, baby," he said. The voice was like rumblings deep in a long-dormant island volcano preparing to sink the island. "Lyssa, baby, make tracks."

"You just settle right down, Bull Harper, or I'll poke you in the eye with a high heel."

"Lyssa, baby—"

"Don't you baby me. I know that look on your dumb face. You want to kill somebody, don't you?"

I groaned.

He stared at her, then leaned over closer to me. "Hey," he said. "Hey. I seen you feeling her delicate can."

"Oh?"

"What about that?"

Well, here it was. The moment of truth. What could I tell him?

"Well, Mr. Harper," I said. "Or Bull. Do you mind if I call you Bull? Ah— Well, Mr. Harper, are you sure that's what you saw?"

"I seen it with my own eyeballs?"

I sighed. I spread my feet a little wider. "Well, yes," I said, "I was."

"Hah! I knew that was what I seen."

Then he did a very interesting thing. He wound four fingers and a thumb into two big fists. Then he hauled them back with the obvious intent of thundering them down on me.

"*Hold* it," I said rapidly. "You know what I did, sure. But don't you want to know *why?*"

He hesitated. "Not 'specially," he said.

"Bull Harper, you listen to the man."

Little Lyssa was still in there trying. I flashed her a grateful look, then said to Bull, "I agree with her."

"Listen to what?" Bull asked. "What's to listen to?"

"Well, Bull," I said, "I'll tell

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you. Do you realize Lyssa does not wear a girdle?"

"Hell, yes, I realize."

I was sweating plenty.

"I'm glad of that—I think. Now, pay attention. I have long been convinced that girdles are adjustable torture chambers, not only for the women they so agonizingly encase but for the men—ah, especially the men."

"I plainly don't understand a word," he said. "And I am to teach you—"

He was already aiming. He had hauled that big long arm and those fists back again.

As he got all set for the blow I

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said rapidly, raising my voice a bit, "Hold it, *hold* it, friend, now I want you to step right up here and hang onto your earlobes because you are going to hear a tale that will make your ears fly right off your head if you loosen your grip."

My blood pressure was up about fifty points but, by golly, Bull hadn't done it yet. He was actually listening. The momentary reprieve gave wings to my tongue and from then on it fairly flew.

"It just so happens," I continued speedily, "that I am perhaps the number-one girdle-hater west of the Rockies.

With something of a shock I realized that the clatter and clink of dishes and drink had stopped. The men and women at tables near me were turned toward me, listening with expressions that varied from interest to astonishment to curdling dismay. But I couldn't stop now.

"I want you to get this, Bull. If women *must* wear the things, it is only justice to make them pay the cost of the multiple frustrations which they cause.'

Some nut yelled, "Hear, hear!" and there was even a scattering of applause. Damn, I thought, they may ruin my concentration. So I went on helter-skelter.

"And now hear this: With a return to anatomical sanity, women will automatically become wiser. At first, of course, they may become dizzier, for when they remove the tourniquets which for so long have strangled their arteries, veins, livers, kidneys, bladders, and yoohoos, there will be a great rush of blood to their brains and they may faint and fall down like stones. But in the *end* they will become wiser. Right now, they are very dull in the end."

Damned if there wasn't a great rattle of applause. From the corners of my eyes I could see guys—yeah, all of them were guys—clapping. One middle-aged character yelled, "You hear that, my dear Sarah?"

I didn't let it bother me but continued, not merely to Bull but now to everybody else in the *Seraglio*. "Friends, it has happened to me, and it is like walking into a door in the darkness. Believe me, once people really get this message, it will spread from city to city, from settlement to hamlet to town to—in time it will ungirdle the earth.

"Now, think what this means! *Think* of it, friends! Babes all over the place, looking *real*, and *smiling*. The lines of self-inflicted strangulation gone from their faces, rich red blood circulating and singing in the veins, not just lying there and going plop. Husbands home from a hard day at the office will find their wives springing at them from the middle of the living room. Millions of women all at once taking deep breaths for the first time in scores of bitter years may stir up enough wind to blow

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all the smog away! *Men, are you with me?"*

Well, all hell busted loose. Applause and shouts bounced from the rafters. Boy, they were really drunk. Three women got up and walked stiffly out. They did not, of course, jiggle when they walked, which is why they walked stiffly.

Bull was looking at me with a very intent expression on his chops. Finally, he said, "Yeah. Forget all that. What about, I seen you feeling her delicate fanny."

"Oh, hell," I said. "Go ahead and hit me."

"Bull Harper!" That was Lyssa. "I'll kick you in the eyes with my heels, I swear I will, you ever-lovin'—"

"Bull," I said. "You *can't* hit me. Not now."

"I can't?"

"Of *course* not. Not if you value your life. Look around us, Bull. Can't you see? These are my—my people. They're *with* me. I'm their . . . their leader now. See?"

"Not yet."

"If you hit me they'll assume it's because you didn't like what I said. They'll think you disagree with me. That you're a girdle-lover. Do you want that?"

"I guess not. But—" He stared at me. Then he looked at Lyssa. "Lyssa, baby, what you think?"

"Oh, he's right, Bull," she said. "No question, he's right."

"Huh," he said. Then, "Come on, Lyssa baby, let's make tracks."

And make tracks they did. But when only a few feet away, Lyssa turned her head and, with heat lightning flickering in those innocent round eyes, winked.

"You *quit* that," I said.

And then they were gone.

X

SUDDENLY JERRY VAIL was standing next to me. He didn't speak. He beckoned with a trembling finger, turned, and stalked out of the lounge, across the lobby, and into his office. I followed him inside and shut the door.

He looked at me for a while, shaking his head. Then he said slowly and deliberately, "I suppose you're not interested in what is happening to Mr. Monaco."

"Sure I am. Indeed I am. The things I've gone through for that man—well, how is he?"

"He is, as you might be able to guess, not happy. One could even say his agitation has reached remarkable proportions. However, I am assured he will be released within the hour, possibly in the next few minutes. He will, of course, be interested in knowing how you are progressing with the case. How are you?"

"Fine, how are you?"

"You imbecile, you know what I meant. I meant, how are you progressing with the case?"

"Well, you know how it is. A little here, a little there—"

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"In other words, you've actually *nothing* valid to report."

He mumbled something else, but I was thinking—actually, I'd already learned quite a number of things of real importance, even though some of them might have bypassed my brain. Temporarily, of course. For example, there was —yeah, those bits from Lyssa. Jeanne wanting to talk to Ephrim Sardis' bodyguard. A guy named—uh-huh. Bull Harper. I knew I'd heard that name somewhere before.

It was a shuddering thought: I was going to have to hunt up Bull Harper and talk to him *again*.

Perhaps to drive that thought out of my mind, and with the rest of what Lyssa had told me still in it, I said to Vail, "Did Jeanne talk to you or your wife about Mr. Sardis?"

"Jeanne?"

"Jeanne Jax. The dead girl."

"Her? Why in hell would she talk to us about Ephrim?"

"Beats me. I just wondered."

He stared at me for quite a while, a peculiarly intent expression on his face. Finally he said deliberately, "She did not. And also I feel certain she did not ever talk to my wife. But I don't get the—are you sure, Scott, that you know what you're doing?"

He ran a hand through his wavy golden hair, mussing it up a lot. Then, briskly, he told me what *he'd* been doing. He had phoned

Monaco's attorneys, talked to the police, done all he could. His wife was home, under sedation. He'd been going crazy trying to accomplish all that and still stay on top of arrangements for the party. He intimated that my activities were not helping him to hang onto his remaining shreds of sanity. I had to admit that he did look pretty well shot.

He looked at his watch and said, with some agitation, "The party's starting right now. I have to check the kitchen. And I suppose you'd like to get something to eat."

"Yeah, it's probably time I put something solid on my stomach."

"I'll see you later, then," he said, thus dismissing me.

I was hungry, at that. So out I went, headed for the food—and the action.

There was sure going to be plenty of both.

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As I strolled around I saw several familiar faces, some of them familiar not only to me but to much of the planet's population. Movie stars and TV personalities, a few politicians, a couple of reporters I recognized from L.A., the polished and witty host of a late-night TV talkathon, a magazine writer or two.

I wandered back to the main swimming pool which was the center of much of the most interesting activity. Spotting an unoccupied chaise longue, I occupied it. After five minutes of relaxation I figured I'd get busy and solve the case, maybe. Or at least hunt up Bull Harper and Lyssa again. Or at least Lyssa. And I wanted to find Carol Shearing, the late Jeanne Jax's roommate for a night, too.

There was lots I wanted to do. But for five minutes I was simply going to let some of my tossed green salad and prime ribs digest —shouldn't work immediately after eating—and gaze upon sights I might not in this lifetime see again.

XI

IT WAS JUST eight-thirty when I managed to run down Carol Shearing. Lyssa had told me she was the gal with whom it had been intended Jeanne Jax share a room, but Lyssa hadn't told me what she looked like. However—only a few minutes after somewhat reluctantly forcing myself from my poolside chaise longue—I learned from an Amazonian lovely dressed in very little not only that Carol was present but where she was.

The lovely pointed her out, merely by facing in the general direction of a curvy blonde wearing one of the naucth-girl or temple-dancer costumes, which apparently were the official garb of the beauty contestants.

"That's Carol," she said. Then she turned to point at the elephant. "What is that thing?" she asked, in a tone full of wonder.

"That is an elephant."

"I thought they were extink."

"No. At least that one isn't. Large beast, isn't he?"

She smiled ecstatically, and I stalked away.

Carol Shearing was talking to a heavy-set hulk, rather broad of beam, and as I walked toward them I heard him say, "Well, thanks, doll. See you around."

He'd been facing away from me, but as he turned and walked toward the hotel he glanced at me from deep-set eyes.

The girl turned and headed toward the swimming pool. I fell into step beside her and said, "Hello—You're Carol Shearing, aren't you?"

She smiled automatically. "Yes. Yes. Hello." She seemed to be quite keyed up, her pretty face flushed and glowing.

"I'm Shell Scott. Have you got a minute?"

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"Just about. I have to go fall in the pool. You can walk with me, though."

"You have to what?"

"Fall in the pool. It's my publicity man's idea. He's a genius."

"Must be. Well, I won't keep you from the works of genius, Miss Shearing. Just wanted to ask if you've any idea where Jeanne Jax is."

She frowned a mite. "Why's everybody so interested in Jeanne all of a sudden?"

"Everybody?"

"Well, maybe that's an exaggeration. But the fellow I was just talking to, and now you."

"Oh? What did he want to know about her?"

"Just where she was. I'm supposed to be her roomie, but I don't even know where she is. That's what I told him."

"Who was . . ." Then I remembered.

I guess I hadn't recognized him without his cigar. It was the beefy character who'd been blowing smoke in the *Seraglio*. I looked around but he was already out of sight, swallowed up somewhere in the crowd.

Carol was saying, "He didn't tell me his name. Just asked about Jeanne, and when I told him I hadn't seen her he left."

"Uh-huh. You say Jeanne's your —your roomie?"

"Supposed to be. Most of us got here Wednesday, you know, and Jeanne and I were roomies that night. But I didn't even see her yesterday, except once, and she never did show up last night." She rolled her eyes as if doing exercises to strengthen the little muscles, and added, "So I had to sleep all alone."

"A fate worse than insomnia," I said.

Carol was stepping along at a very speedy clip. Anxious to fall into the pool, I guessed. Unless I was far off the mark, her publicity man and nine or ten photographers would just happen to be present when she rose, dripping, from the clear waters.

It was going to be something to see, undoubtedly. The gauzy outfit offered very little concealment when not even damp. The bloomers were completely transparent, and bystanders were spared being spun into shock merely by a wisp of opaque underthing, while the top was no more than a sort of half-blouse made of thin cheesecloth. Since fine print could have been read through that blouse if the moon was full, speedily moving Carol provided nearly as much activity and excitement as cavalry attacking the Indians.

"Uh, what say we slow down?" I said to her.

"Golly, I don't have time," she said. "Oh—here, hold my watch, will you?"

She slipped a little dinky gadget off her arm and handed it to me.

"Yeah, sure," I said. I peered at

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the watch and said, "Carol, what did you mean, you didn't see Jeanne yesterday except once? What was the once?"

There was some kind of musical group playing on a raised platform near the pool, and she had to raise her voice a bit to compete with the oddly melodic music. It sounded like something to charm cobras with, and a couple of other nautch girls on the blue-tiles were making some very snakelike and charming movements.

Carol stopped and looked around, apparently caught her publicity man's eye and nodded. Then she said to me, "Oh, that was yesterday afternoon sometime. I was over by Misty's suite, big movie star—she gets a suite, not a two-to-a-room like us. Of course, she's lovely, and awfully nice." Carol looked at the pool's waters and, after thinking briefly, went on, "Of course, a movie star deserves a suite."

"Misty?"

Carol continued, rattling on breathlessly, "Misty opened the door for somebody and I looked inside to see what the suite was like, and Jeanne was in there."

"Misty Lombard?" I said.

Carol blinked up at me. "Of course, Misty Lombard. Oh, well, that Jeanne was stuck up anyway, if you ask me. Pretty enough, but not very friendly—" She broke off, having apparently caught a secret signal. "Oh, here I go!"

"Hey, wait a minute—"

Not a chance.

She walked over by the pool, then turned and sort of strutted along near its edge, turning to wave and laugh and blow a kiss at somebody in my general area who had clearly amused her a great deal. Clearly it wasn't me. And then—tragedy.

Somehow one of her high heels —upon which she had recently been racing like a mountain goat at approximately twenty miles an hour—got twisted beneath her, and she started to fall backward, plummeting toward the water—at the shallow end of the pool, I noted —screaming very piercingly.

The dunking of lovely hippily-hipped and bosomy-busted Carol Shearing—soon to be known to millions of fans as Sherry Carroll—she was a triumph of drama, feminine art, and ballistics. She lit just right and sank *just* deep enough and hit a clear sweet A nuzzling high C, and bounced up very bouncily with the water streaming from her and churning passionately midway of the curving hips, and didn't even get her hair wet.

"Oh!" she cried in pretty embarrassment.

Hell, it wasn't pretty, it was *gorgeous*.

It was as though water was a magic elixir which dissolved the half-blouse and bloomers entirely, and I knew as I watched her climb gracefully from the drink after one

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more lilting cry, that I had seen TV and cinema history in the making.

Carol Shearing, costumed like all the other beauties as a slightly naughty nautch girl, fell into the pool; but from it, her sensational nudity concealed only by what appeared to be the cellophane from three cigarete packs, rose Sherry Carroll.

I had to wait while maybe a hundred flashbulbs flashed and for the conclusion of at least one brief interview, but finally I was not only at Sherry's side but had one tenth of her attention.

She looked at me, still hiding both beautiful breasts behind her little fingers and cried, "I'm so *ashamed!*"

"Yeah. Baby, I'm the guy holding your watch."

"What? Oh. Oh, good grief." She looked all around and hissed at me, "Look, keep your mouth shut, will you?"

"Sure."

"Please?"

"Sure."

"I'll do anything."

"Sure. I mean, don't worry."

"I was so excited, I guess I didn't know what I was saying to you. You will—

"Just keep your mouth shut and I'll—say, you're not in pictures, are you?"

"No," I said, a little sadly.

We found a spot momentarily free of people, and I said, "If I heard you correctly, you told me you saw Jeanne Jax in Misty Lombard's suite yesterday afternoon."

"Yes. She was sitting in there smoking a cigarette. Why are you so interested?"

"Just believe I'm interested. And I've got nearly a minute left."

"Take all the time you want, honey."

"When was this, exactly?"

"After dinner, I think. Oh, sure, that's how it was Misty opened the door for a boy from room service. At least he was carrying a tray. I thought probably it was from the dining room."

"You mean Misty's been eating in her suite

"Oh, she ate in the Mandarin Room. I saw here there when I had dinner."

"No kidding. Interesting."

"I'm not *sure* it was food on the tray—it was covered up with napkins and so on. But I thought maybe it was dinner for Jeanne."

"Yeah, that's what's so interesting."

It also was apparently all she knew, so I thanked her and gave her back her watch. She said, "You swear you won't tell?"

"Your secret is safe with me. By the way, you wouldn't know where Miss Lombard happens to be now, would you?"

"Well, I saw her just before you came up to me there near the elephants. She was at the kissing booth."

"The—*kissing* booth?"

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"Uh-huh, where some of the girls are selling kisses."

"Selling *kisses?*"

"Uh-huh. For charity."

"Sweet charity," I said.

She told me where it was. Only twenty or thirty yards beyond where Carol and I had met, near the elephants.

Well, *that* was sure interesting, I thought. And a little fumbling in my pretty pants with the keen stripes assured me that I had my wallet on me. And my checkbook. And my Diner's Club card, just in case.

XII

IT WAS A kissing booth, all right. The thing was merely an open-to-the-air frame structure built on the order of a temporary fireworks stand—which struck me as rather appropriate—and at the top was a sigh, KISSES FOR SALE! in lipstick-red letters on a creamy background, the exclamation point followed by the figure one and two zeros.

Gad, I thought, only a buck? Hardly seems enough. Not with all these *rich* guys around. The poor girls could wear out their chops, lose all their pucker, get limp like old bicycle tires.

Ah, but there were *two* booths, I noticed.

In one of them, a flaming redhead was selling little eastern pastries, like paclava. I sprang right on by that booth and stopped at the second one.

A sweet-lipped brunette stood inside the booth, just beyond a four-foot-high wall of pink-painted boards, pretty thick boards too, and on this side of the wall—my side—stood luscious Misty Lombard.

When we'd first bumped into each other I had been so magnetized by her eyes, and lips, by the scent of her and the sweet sound of her voice, I had barely seen the rest of her. But now I noticed the rest of her.

She wore a shimmering gold-lamé brassiere. It was more opaque than several thicknesses of air, but not too much. It was cut at the top down into an incurving V which revealed searing vistas of that which some Mohammedans expect to find in their heaven.

The fact that she was not inside the booth didn't quite penetrate at first; all I knew for sure was that there *she* was, with those magnificent eyes and lips and all those other things, and I cried, "Misty! I'll take a dozen!"

She turned her head, saw me and smiled. "Oh, Shell, hello. A dozen what?"

"What have you got?"

She glanced at a sign over our heads. KISSES FOR SALE! "You must mean kisses," she said. Then she laughed. "They're a hundred dollars, you know."

"Each?" I said, taken aback.

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"Well, hummm. Hundred smackers a smack, hey? Let me count my change. I've got a Diner's Club card, would that—Ah, make that a Carte Blanche—"

"But you'll have to talk to Lenore."

"Who?"

"Lenore."

"Who in hell's Lenore?"

"She's the girl in the kissing booth."

I looked into the booth. "Hi, Lenore," I said and she dimpled and smiled. She wasn't half bad, but she wasn't Misty, so I turned back to Misty.

"Why aren't you in the booth?"

"I'm not working the booth, Shell."

"You mean your shift's *over* already? Ah, do you girls ever put in any overtime?"

She laughed. "Overtime—you make it sound like the girls have to belong to a union. They don't."

"Thank Heaven. Be a terrible thing if they did. Right in the middle of a pucker and the boss says, 'That's it, kids. I'm pulling your lips out on strike. Either we get a guaranteed lifetime wage or *nobody* kisses.' Why, I can see—"

"I'm not working the booth at all. I was just talking to Lenore."

"Oh? Well instead, then, do you mind if I ask you a couple of questions?"

"What kind of questions?" Her soft lips curved a little.

"Well, like where's Mr. Leaf? Is

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he dead? I can think of no other reason why he'd fail to be at your side."

"Oh, Simon got involved in a talk with a couple of other producers. And he's supposed to join a group in the Sabre Room soon. So I've just been entertaining myself."

"And lots of other people, I'll wager."

"Any more questions?"

"Just a couple little ones." I lowered my voice and added, "About Jeanne Jax."

"Jeanne?" she said. "What do you want to know about her?"

I took her elbow and led her a few feet away. When we were comparatively alone I said, "You know who I'm talking about, don't you?"

"Of course."

"She's not at the party," I said. "Did you see her at any time today?"

Misty was quiet for quite a while. Then she asked, "She's not here?"

"No."

"I hadn't seen her, either. I was wondering where she could be."

"When was the last time you saw her, Misty?"

A little of the surface amusement left her face. She said, "I saw Jeanne early this morning, when I got up. She stayed in my suite last night."

I don't know why I was surprised to hear her come right out with it. No reason she shouldn't have, unless she had something to conceal; and I knew of no reason for her to be concealing anything.

I said, "How come she stayed with you, Misty? I heard she was supposed to room with a girl named Carol Shearing."

"She was. But I knew Jeanne slightly before coming here—she sang with a group in one of the lounges in Las Vegas for a while, and I met her there a couple of months ago."

"Just ran into her?"

"Not exactly. I was with Simon and some other people from the studio. Simon asked her to our table for a drink after her act. He thought she was a remarkably attractive girl. Which she is."

"Uh-huh."

"Anyway, that's how we met. Well, Jeanne knew I had suite here, and she simply asked me yesterday if she could spend the night with me. I saw no reason to refuse."

"She say why she didn't want to stay with Carol?"

"Yes, naturally I asked her that. There wasn't any secret about what rooms the girls were staying in, or with whom, and because of that Jeanne was afraid her husband might find her. She'd seen him here, and didn't want him to see her, she said."

"Husband? She's married?"

"She said she was married, but, well, sort of separated."

"Let me get this straight. She

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didn't want hubby to *find* her? Why not?"

"I gathered she was afraid he'd beat her up or something. Jeanne didn't say that in so many words, but she did seem afraid—awfully nervous, at least." Misty paused. "Jeanne told me her husband hated the idea of her being in the beauty contest. Didn't want her parading around—" she smiled again—"half naked, as he put it."

"He sounds like a stick. Who's the hubby?"

"I don't think she mentioned his name. If she did, I don't remember it."

"She tell you any more about her husband? Or of anything else that might have been worrying her?"

"No, not really. We spent quite a bit of time together, and talked till about ten last night. Just girl talk, you know. But she did act rather strangely, I thought. Even stayed in the room alone while I had dinner." Misty added, as if it were an afterthought, "I had room service bring her a tray so she wouldn't go hungry."

"I already knew about that. Somebody saw a tray delivered to your room."

"Oh?" Her voice was a little cooler. "You've been checking up on me?"

"Not you. Jeanne Jax."

"Well, hard at work, I see. Risking mayhem, overcoming impossible obstacles. Splendid!"

That wasn't Misty. And it sure wasn't me. I looked around to the turgid spot from which the words had come. They had come, not surprisingly, from Ormand Monaco. He and Jerry Vail had walked up together and now stood a couple of feet from us.

Monaco looked from me to Misty, back at me. Then at the nearby Kisses-For-Sale booth. Then he fixed the sharp, dark eyes on me again.

"Splendid," he repeated. "At this rate, Mr. Scott, all my worries should be over within not less than ten years. I am well aware you have an eye for beauty, but I did not employ you to investigate the beauties of all womankind—"

"Watch that 'investigate' bit, Mr. Monaco. You're damn close to blowing my cover."

"I am damn close to firing you," he barked.

Hell, fire, I thought. If he canned me I'd have to leave this grand party.

"Now, hold your horses, old bean," I said. "As a matter of fact, I am tossing clues around like crazy, and—"

"I think, perhaps, employing you at all was a mistake. I think perhaps it was a cataclysm."

I thought: Maybe. . . . And then I thought: Why not?

Monaco was saying, "Mr. Scott, ever since we met I have suffered indescribable—"

So I held up a hand and cut him

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off. "Please, Mr. Monaco. Can't you see I'm working?"

Then I turned to Misty, fixed her with a stern glance which I hoped she would not misinterpret, and said, "Now, Miss Lombard. Do you or do you not deny that a tray from room service was delivered to your suite last night? I warn you, I have a witness."

She blinked those magical eyes, but then her expression smoothed and she came right in, on my side. I could have kissed her. "Why—well, yes," she said, in fluttering confusion. "I mean, I don't deny it."

"A tray of food, surely."

"Surely. Yes, food."

"And do you or do you not deny that you had just eaten copiously in the Mandarin Room?"

"No. Yes. I mean—oh, you've got me so confused, Mr. Scott! I ate. Yes, I ate, and ate, a salad, and steak, and potatoes, and carrots cooked with honey, and—"

"Don't confuse me with the menu."

Mr. Monaco's mouth was open about half an inch, and I could see a little of his tongue sticking out. I continued to bore in. "So. You ate enough food for two large men, then had a tray of food sent to your room? Are you in the habit of eating meals for dessert?"

"No, of course—"

"Then it is logical to presume, I presume, that you were not *yourself* going to eat the tray of food?"

"Yes, I wasn't—"

"Then the tray must have been for somebody else. For whom Whom? What was it for, Miss Lombard?"

"For Jeanne."

"For Jeanne—Come on, out with it."

"Jeanne Jax."

Pretty quick I'd dragged all the rest of it from her. Jeanne had stayed in Misty's rooms overnight, they'd talked girl talk, Jeanne was married but had seen her husband from whom she was sort of separated, she didn't want him to find her and sock her in the jaw, and such.

I wound it up, "Then she did not describe or identify her husband, nor did she indicate fear of anyone else?"

"No. But she certainly wanted to stay out of sight. And she did seem terribly nervous. She was certainly on edge last night."

"And you've not seen her since early this morning?"

"No. She was in the room when I left for breakfast, but when I went back later she was gone. She'd taken her few things with her."

"All right. Thank you, Miss Lombard. Sorry I had to be so rough on you, but a job's a job." I paused, and winked at her with the eye not visible to Monaco and Vail. "I'll probably want to talk to you later, so don't get some funny ideas about—"

I turned to Ormand Monaco and

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said, "If that's all, sir, I'll be packing my things."

"Hmm," he said. He gazed at me curiously, and Vail scowled at me. Then Monaco said, "That was very interesting. It explains, at least, where Miss Jax was yesterday afternoon and evening. Nice work, Mr. Scott."

"Well, it helps when you know what you're after," I said truthfully.

"Have you found her husband yet?"

"No, but I saw a guy talking to one of the contestants, who just might be the fellow in question, and whom I shall attempt to find—if, that is, I'm not fired."

"Fired? Oh, forget that. Just keep me informed."

"Of course, Mr. Monaco."

We talked for a few more minutes. He told me of his "appalling" experience at the sheriff's department. Actually, he'd been treated very politely and well, but had over and over been asked questions about Ephrim Sardis, where he'd been driving this afternoon, and if he knew of any enemies Sardis had. It had not been necessary for his lawyers to swing into vigorous action, since the sheriff and some deputies merely questioned him closely and then let him go free as a bird—but he nonetheless had the feeling they were right behind him with birdshot.

"You did drive along Ocotillo Lane this afternoon," I said.

"Yes." He nodded absently. "It's only a few miles from here. I went right by the Sardis estate, I'm sure, though I was hardly aware of it at the time."

"Is that all the law had on you? That a man in one of their cars spotted you near the scene?"

"Yes. He saw me." Monaco hesitated briefly. ". . . near the entrance, that is the road in front of the estate. As he arrived, that is. But before he went inside and found Ephrim dead. The deputy recognized my car, presumably."

"I understand somebody phoned in and reported hearing a gunshot. Did they tell you anything more about that?"

"No. They didn't tell *me* anything. Just asked their infernal questions." Monaco looked at his watch. "I must see some of my guests. By the way, Mr. Scott, you will be free to pursue whatever course you feel is necessary, but tomorrow morning at eleven you will have to meet with the other judges. You are, after all, supposed to be here solely as a judge of the Talent Search."

"Eleven in the morning, huh? What's the meeting about?"

"It's in preparation for the contest Saturday evening. You'll all be supplied with literature, rules for judging, schedules showing the times of various events. The meeting is merely to help assure that everything goes smoothly, and with dignity."

Yeah, that was important.

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"Okay. I'll be there." It was going to cut into the time I had left between now and noon tomorrow, I thought. And ha-ha, I thought.

Monaco turned to Jerry Vail and said, "Jerry, my guests are still in the Sabre Room. Will you tell them I shall join them in a very few minutes?"

"Certainly, Mr. Monaco." Vail nodded at me, started to turn.

I said, "Mr. Vail."

He stopped. "Yes?"

"I mentioned this earlier; but are you sure Jeanne—Miss Jax—didn't talk to you after arriving at the hotel?"

"No, she didn't." He shook his head, frowning a little. "In fact, I guess she's the only one of the contestants I failed to meet. I didn't get to talk to her at all."

"Do you know for sure if she said anything to your wife?"

"Such a thing never entered my mind." He paused, still with that frown on his handsome face. "I could ask her."

"I'd appreciate if it you would. Just one other thing. Do you know where Bull Harper was when your father-in-law was killed?"

"I believe Ephrim gave him the afternoon off today. Because of the party tonight. Ephrim knew he wanted to arrange for a costume, things like that." He paused again. "Exactly where Mr. Harper was, I've no idea."

"Okay. Thanks, Mr. Vail."

I grinned at him and he left.

In a moment a muscular man of medium height, wearing a black dinner jacket and tie, strolled over to us. Simon Leaf.

I'd never met him but I'd seen him before and recognized him. He was a worried-looking man, his forehead creased with deep wrinkles, though he was not yet forty. He wore his black hair in a brush-like crewcut that resembled the beginning of a beard, and there was a sort of sickly gray cast to his cheeks that spoke of healthy whiskers.

He and Monaco greeted each other cordially and chatted for a few seconds. They were, I gathered, about to meet with Vips for highballs and sundry bits of jolly conversation.

Monaco introduced us and we shook hands. I said I'd heard of him, and he told me he'd heard of me, too, though from his tone I got the impression he hadn't heard of me as often as I must have heard of him.

Monaco glanced at his watch again then said to me, "What did you mean, Mr. Scott, when you

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mentioned Miss Jax being curious about Ephrim Sardis?"

"Well—" I glanced at Simon Leaf.

Monaco said, "Oh, it's all right. It was necessary for me to tell Mr. Leaf why I asked you to come here. In order that you could be accredited as a judge of the talent search."

"I see. Well, Okay. I was just curious about why she was curious, that's all. It seems she asked a few people a bunch of questions about Mr. Sardis. So many that people noticed. And about Neyra, Mrs. Vail, too, apparently."

Monaco ran a lean finger along the angular line of his jaw. "That is odd," he said. "She asked me about Neyra, too. When she first arrived here at the *Khan*."

"Oh? How'd that happen?"

"I met the girls when some of them arrived Wednesday morning, of course. I was alone with Miss Jax for a few minutes, in the main lobby. Jerry and Neyra were standing, talking near the entrance to the *Seraglio*. Miss Jax was looking at them and asked me who Neyra was—that is, who the lovely black-haired woman was. I told her she was Neyra Vail, Ephrim Sardis' daughter, and that her husband was standing there with her. Miss Jax seemed quite taken aback, and said, 'She's his *wife?*' Much like that, with that emphasis. I told her she was, and Miss Jax then asked me who Ephrim Sardis was."

"What did you tell her about Sardis?"

"Merely what I've already told you, Mr. Scott. That he was a friend of mine, a wealthy and highly respected member of the community, active in the background of many civic affairs and such."

"One other thing, Mr. Monaco. If I'm going to ask sensible questions about Sardis and Miss Jax, I'll damn near have to tell a few people why I'm asking. At least, tell those persons who've probably already been approached by the law, or who may be."

He frowned. "Well, only those. And don't tell anyone I've employed you. We must be as discreet as it is possible to be."

Monaco glanced at his watch again. "I regret that I haven't more time to spend with you, Mr. Scott. Have you anything else to report?"

"Nothing important at the moment."

"I'll be somewhere in the hotel or on the grounds. You can page me if I'm not immediately available.

"Right. I've some things to do myself. I'd better get busy," I added, "while the time's ripe."

XIII

BY TEN, three other girls and one inebriated photographer had fallen into the swimming pool. Nobody took photos of the photographer. By then I had talked to

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another dozen of the beauty contestants, and found that Jeanne Jax had talked to four of them herself.

One of them she'd asked, Thursday morning after breakfast, about Neyra Vail. The others she'd spoken to later that morning, and had asked them questions about the now-late Ephrim. There hadn't been anything incriminating in the questions themselves. The first gal told Jeanne all she knew about Neyra was that she was Sardis' daughter, and she didn't know anything about Sardis except he was some kind of local bigshot with lots of loot.

Two of the other girls hadn't known what Jeanne was talking about, but the third one had seen Ephrim Sardis once and gave Jeanne a little more information. None of it struck me as exceptionally important, however. Not for a while.

That last gal was a short, shapely, cheer-leader type named Lula, a soft-eyed little sweetie possibly twenty years old, and by the time I got around to her she'd put away, I guessed, about a full pint of something pretty illegal. After the preliminaries, she said, "No, all Jeanne says to me is do I know this Sardis. This Ephrim Sardis. Like I said, I'd seen the fat old grampaw once, so I told her."

"Told her what?"

"He was an old grampaw, fat, like two or three hundred pounds, and he was rich as hell. I should be so rich. A guy that rich, I could almost get married to a guy that rich.

"That's what you told Miss Jax?"

"Well, like that. I didn't say to her I'd marry a guy that rich. I said to her, a guy that rich, even if he did weigh two or three hundred pounds, he—"

"What else did Miss Jax ask you about him?"

"Oh, practically anything. Where he lived, what he did, if he was in business with anybody, like that—things I didn't know, so naturally I couldn't tell her."

"Where'd you meet Mr. Sardis, Lula?"

"Didn't actually meet him. It was at a party in Hollywood last month. Some of us girls were there. And I saw this fat old money man with his daughter and her guy, her husband."

"Jerry Vail?"

"Him, and the swell owns this place, the thin one."

"Ormand Monaco."

"Ormand Monaco. Yes. Wouldn't that name crack you? Ormand. And Monaco on top of it. Boy, it cracks me, like—"

"They were all together?"

"Isn't that what I said?"

"Ephrim Sardis, his daughter Neyra, and Neyra's husband, Jerry Vail. And Ormand Monaco. Who else was there?"

"Just lots of other girls. And some Hollywood people. Mostly movie people. They were all go-

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ing to give us screen tests, and like that—"

"Simon Leaf?"

"Him, yes. And some other producers, and movie people. *Movie* people. And television. And Tibby Mannly, the big movie star. Boy, is he cute? He cracks me; he's cuter than pink stretch pants; I could bite his earlobes off—"

"What were they all doing there?"

"How would I know? It was just a party. Who asks?"

"Was Miss Jax at the party?"

"No, not her."

"When was she talking to you yesterday?"

"That was around noon. A little before."

"During lunch?"

"I didn't see her when we all ate lunch. It was before that. She came to my room."

"Uh-huh. Did she ask you about anybody else? Neyra, Jerry Vail, Ormand—"

"Just him. Sardis."

I got away from her with my earlobes intact—actually, they were never in any real danger. For good or ill, I don't look the least little bit like Tibby Mannly. Maybe it's just as well.

I took the shortest route back toward the hotel, that route being along one of the creepy paths and amid the bosky lanes and such. Perhaps I shouldn't have taken that route. I should have gone along the most brightly-lighted stretch of grass, jumping up and down and yelling.

But it had been literally hours since I'd been shot at, and I wasn't even sure the guy had especially wanted to kill me. I'd been thinking the guy could have been merely a killer trying to get away from the scene of his kill; and I, being on the scene, merely happened to be a natural target.

So, I was wrong about everything.

I think I almost knew what was going to happen five seconds before it happened.

But "almost" is one of those sad words. "Almost" is never good enough.

I'd covered about half the distance to the hotel, and if it hadn't been for the noise and my memory I could have felt I was alone in a well-watered desert oasis. It was barely possible to see light from the swimming pool ahead, but I could still hear that gang of birds behind me going *scrawwck,* and *creeawwch,* and *peep,* and I heard something else, too. Maybe it was because of all the jungle noises, but to me it sounded like the soft pad of a jungle cat slinking along behind me.

But it was just before that, five seconds before that sound, when I "almost" knew what was going to happen. I didn't see anything, or hear anything except the nutty birds, but I sure as hell *felt* something. Maybe it was thought; may-

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be it was sound perceptible only beneath my level of consciousness; maybe it was the tiniest stirring of air nearby.

Whatever it was, a faint chill, faint but suddenly there, raced over my skin. There was a slight quick tightening of my solar plexus. I wasn't alarmed; whatever I felt wasn't enough to cause alarm. But I reached for my gun, just to feel it, the way a man will unconsciously reach out and pat his dog.

With my hand halfway to my shoulder holster I remembered; I wasn't wearing the clamshell holster tonight. And I dropped my arm, reached into my trousers pocket and let my fingers close around the hard, reassuring butt of the Colt Special.

Than, that soft padding sound behind me.

I remember thinking, very much like an idiot, "Tiger? Hell, it can't be a tiger, but it sure can't be a bird, either—" and that was all.

The soft padding stopped and there was the obvious solid thump of a foot slapping the ground behind me and a grunt, the small half-swallowed sound a man makes when he gathers his muscles and his mental strength to swing a sap or club or gun and hit you as hard as possible on the head.

Somewhere between the thump and that grunt I started to duck, and I almost made it. I was yanking the Colt from my pocket, and starting to drop a shoulder and turn—then, pain, the stunning shock, a sudden grinding agony and incredible sound like no other sound, and I was falling.

I not only knew I'd been hit, I knew as well as I'd ever known anything that unless I could stop it I was going to be hit again, and again if necessary until my skull was smashed or split open and I was dead—and I couldn't stop it. I couldn't get a message to arms or legs, couldn't turn or roll. I'd felt my knees hit earth and then my right shoulder slam the ground, but I was stuck there like a man fixed in time. My right arm lay almost full length, flat along the ground, gun still gripped in the fingers. But I couldn't raise the gun. The arm was dead.

It seemed that I lay like that not merely for swift moments but for long, lazy seconds. The seconds stretched like taffy—a mental *tick* and a thousand thoughts and feel of earth beneath me and slow blossoming of pain and then finally another *tick* again—but it wasn't that kind of time only for me, but for him, too. For him, because I saw from the corner of my eye his foot suspended in air, slowly descending, moving with the unnatural deliberation and grace of a feather in water, until it came to rest with infinite delicacy inches from my face.

I knew that above me he held over his head the club, the weapon, and that it too in another of those

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stretching other-dimensional seconds would descend toward me. I was trying to move arms, legs, fingers, everything, but at that moment I stopped. With as great an effort of will as I had ever been capable of, I made myself stop those movements, or rather attempts at movement, and put all my power and all my thought into moving one finger.

There was time, that kind of crazy time, to think, and I knew I couldn't hit anything but earth even if I managed to pull the Colt's trigger; but I also knew the sound of the gunshot at his feet was the only hope I had of stopping the man even briefly, of slowing him down.

I didn't even know I'd managed to pull the trigger. But I heard the blast of the gun and felt the .38 kick in my hand. And I saw the foot near me move, twist in the soft earth of the path.

And finally I could move something besides a finger. Not much, and not fast, but I started to roll off my shoulder onto my back—and then the shadowy figure looming over me was gone. Feet thumped on the path. I tried to turn toward him, lift my gun toward him, and couldn't do it. In fact, it took quite a while simply to push myself into a sitting position. And then I just sat there.

Maybe I could have gotten to my feet sooner. I don't know. I just didn't much care about doing it. I felt sick. I wondered if I was going to lose my marvelous dinner, and all that splendid booze. I didn't much care about that, either. I discovered my white turban lying on the path beside me, and realized it must have softened the blow. Because of that, I hadn't been knocked out, not all the way, but far enough to suit me. And unless you have been slammed on the head with real, with determined vigor, you cannot possibly understand how remote from pleasure is the experience.

So I sat there for quite a while, decided I wasn't going to lose my dinner, and then with much care got to my feet. My assailant was long gone, had been gone for at least five normal minutes I knew, but nobody had come tripping up this creepy lane to investigate the gunshot.

No matter. My bubbling head was what mattered. While sitting on my behind I had probed with gentle fingers and learned that my scalp, but not my skull, was split; and I had held a handkerchief on the raw spot until the blood stopped oozing. If I hadn't been so filled with great and burning desire, I wouldn't have minded just sitting there till a large scab formed and fell off, but I now nurtured, almost cherished, that desire; to get my hands on the guy who'd slugged me.

And there were three people, at least three, I wanted to find and talk to in a hurry.

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So I turned around and around, like a dog preparing to go to sleep, got my bearings, and started walking toward the *Kubla Khan*.

XIV

WHEN I finally managed to totter to the *Kubla Khan* and start checking up on people it was too late for anything but three aspirins, which I took.

There was another thing, too. I was addled. My brain was bubbling. It was fizzling like a giant Alka Seltzer. Consequently I felt like a mental giant, perhaps because I was for a change so exceptionally *aware* of my brain, as a man sitting in a fire is *aware* of his butt.

My first investigative triumph soared to its dizzying shambles in the Sabre Room, which I found after some difficulty. I remembered Ormand Monaco had said he was going to be with a party in that room—though at first I got it a bit muddled in memory and barged into the Scimitar Room. Sabre, Scimitar, what's the difference?

But at last I found the Sabre Room and, pouncing inside, spotted Ormand Monaco. He was at a table with about a dozen men and women, some in costume and others in semi-formal evening dress. But at first I saw lean, sharp-featured Monaco with only blurs around him. Monaco, in that pearl gray dinner jacket with its zippy foulard lapels matching the gray in the hair bulging over his temples, like the head bulging at the back of my head.

I thumped up, stopped by him, pierced him with a stern look. "So, there you are," I said. "So, where were you?"

All the heads at the table had snapped around to aim at me, but none more speedily than Ormand Monaco's. "What?" he said. "What's this?"

"Don't what's-this me," I said. "You're not going to wraggle out of it. Wirgle . . . Wroogle? Listen, I saw you."

There was a look of consternation on his face. That was good; I had him on the run. He looked around the table. "Governor," he said. "Mr. Mayor. Mr. Leaf. I must apologize for Mr. Scott. I'm sorry, Mrs. Schmock," he added, or something like that. "Mrs. Fleeb." The names weren't getting through to me loud and clear. "General Stonk." *Boy,* my head hurt. Maybe three aspirins weren't enough.

Monaco was looking up at me. "Mr. Scorb," he said in a soothing voice, the way animal trainers talk to new and toothy lions, "you *have* been drinking a bit, haven't you? Your eyes are quite pink."

"Pink, schmink," I said. "And pardon me if I used anybody's name here. I'm just making a point. A point about—huh. I had it here a minute ago."

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Monaco stood up and led me away from the table. "I think you should allow me and my guests to complete our discussion in private," he said.

"Have you left this room in the last ten minutes? Or so? Roughly. Say an hour either way."

He squinted at me, glanced toward the table, back at me. He looked worried, all right. "I did leave once, to look for Mr. Vail." he said. "In fact, I returned only a few minutes ago. Though I fail to understand what concern—"

"Didn't find him, did you?"

"No, as a matter of fact I did not," Monaco admitted. "However—"

"What about Bull Harper?"

"Well, what about him?"

"You didn't see him either, did you?"

"No. But why I should—"

"It's pretty suspicious to me, wouldn't you say?"

"Mr. Scott, I do not know what you are talking about."

I thought about that for a moment. "Neither do I," I said.

"I suggests we continue this discussion at a later date."

"Yeah," I said. "Like next November."

And I left.

I never did find Bull Harper. I knocked once on the door of Lyssa's darkened room, number 218 at the end of the *Khan's* North wing, but either nobody was home or nobody was answering the door. I did find Jerry Vail, but that also was a big nothing.

All I knew was that somebody had clubbed me, and the clubber had intended to kill me. But by midnight I knew I wasn't going to get anywhere. So I decided to have a drink in one of the bars.

I was by then feeling reasonably normal except for the dull throbbing in my skull. At least the fizzing and bubbling had stopped and it occurred to me that a cool drink and a little quiet thought might prove more productive of results than had my recent activity. So I headed for the *Seraglio*.

And ran into Misty Lombard.

I didn't run into her physically this time, just spotted her walking toward the hotel as I started to enter the lobby.

So I waited for her and said, "Hello, hello. Where's Mr. Leaf?"

"Still in conference."

"Fool that he is."

"He talked to me and said it would probably go on most of the night. So I decided to enjoy a quiet drink before going to bed."

"Well, that is precisely what I had in mind, Misty. How about joining me? For the drink."

She bit a corner of her lip gently. cocked her head on one side. And then she smiled and said, "Why not?"

We sat at the bar and had a couple drinks, but I remember little of what we talked about. I know I told her of getting hit on the head, and

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she was marvelously sympathetic; and I asked her to tell me in more detail of her conversation with Jeanne Jax, and she did, but there was little if anything of importance that I didn't already know. So, mainly I just sat and yakked with her, and listened to her soft, sweet voice, and looked at her, and looked.

Finally she said, "Well, I've got to get some sleep. Have to be bright-eyed tomorrow."

"You'll be bright-eyed every tomorrow. I'll walk you home, that is to your suite, Okay? It's dangerous for you to be out there alone, you know."

"With two hundred other people around?"

"Sure. Some of them are men."

"And you'll protect me from the men, is that it?"

"All but one," I said.

So we strolled from the *Khan*, through the lobby and out the main entrance, then over a gravelled path nearly to the end of the south wing where her suite was. At the door she turned, started to say something and stopped.

Then she asked me, "Would you like to come in for a nightcap, Shell? If you're not too tired—"

"Sure. One more can't hurt."

She smiled. "We'll just have one. I do have to get some sleep."

We went inside. The living room was small but sumptuously furnished with thick blue carpet and lighter blue draperies over the front windows, a low blue-green divan, bright oil paintings on the walls. Soft light flowed from a massive lamp with its base on the carpet at one end of the divan.

On the right was a kitchenette and bar with two stools in front of it, and through a half open door on my left I could see the dimly lighted bedroom, sheet and blanket already folded back by the maid, and ready for occupancy.

Ready for occupancy, I was thinking mysteriously, when Misty said from the kitchenette, "Bourbon and water, that's all there is. Except for my sherry."

"Bourbon and water's all I need."

In a minute she came back with the drinks and joined me on the low divan. While in the kitchtnette she must have poked a button or turned a dial because now there was music, something pleasantly unobtrusive, with strings and muted brass and the quivering softness of vibes.

Misty kicked off her pointy-toed shoes and said, "Oh, boy, does that feel good. Do you mind?"

"Are you kidding? It even feels good way over here."

She laughed, stretched out her legs and rested her jazzy feet on the antique mirrored top of a coffee table before the divan, and I leaned toward her, put my arm behind her shoulders, and kissed her.

I was probably as surprised as she was.

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It had not been a premeditated movement. Not that the thought had been at any moment far from my mind; it was just that I didn't think at all about what I was doing. One moment I was looking at her move with a kind of fluid and animal grace, and listening to her free and throaty laugh; the next moment I was near her and her lips were beneath mine.

She stiffened, started to pull away. But only started. Then her body relaxed and her lips became soft and moist and warm. I put my hands behind her back and pressed her close and she crumpled against me, and her arms went around my back and pulled.

When our lips parted I said, "Misty—" and she opened her eyes wide and said, "Don't say anything, Shell. Don't say anything."

Those enormous, wonderful eyes were close to mine. I looked at them, into them, into them as her smooth lids slowly closed over their shadowed darkness. And then I found her mouth with mine again.

Only one drink, she'd said. Actually, we never finished that first one. . . .

IN THE morning, after a breakfast of coffee—my usual day-starter—I drove out Desert View Drive with the Cad's top down, sun just beginning to get warm on my still-turbaned sore head.

Still-turbaned, because nearly all of last night's party-goers would still be present at the *Kubla Khan* for the exciting ribbon-cutting at noon, and were expected to be in costume till then, to add color and magnificence to the ceremonies. Consequently, I was again in my maharajah outfit. Besides, I liked wearing it. Made me feel like a fireman. There was another remote possibility too.

Wise old doctors say alcohol doesn't leave the alcohol *drinker*—until twenty-four hours after his last belt. And it hadn't been nearly that long since my last Rattlesnake Bite, or whatever had been eating me last night. So, conceivably, there were still a few little asps slithering around in the vicinity of my duodenum. Whatever that is. And wherever that is.

At any rate, I felt grand.

It was a beautiful morning. If it had been raining and hailing it would have been a beautiful morning. For, despite getting bashed on the skull last night, after Misty and murmured words and soft lips, I felt energetic and positively euphoric.

Then I winced. I had suddenly realized I'd not yet been in to see Sergeant Torgesen. As I recalled, he'd told me not to forget, adding, "I wouldn't like it if you forgot," or something menacing like that.

I picked up the radio-phone and put in a call to the sheriff's department in Indio.

It took a minute or two for me to get Sergeant Torgesen, and when I

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told him it was Shell Scott calling he said icily, "Good of you. Where in hell you been?"

"Why, at the *Kubla Khan,* where else? But I think I'm right now on my way down to see you, as agreed. Of course, I should probably change my clothes first."

"I didn't mean you should come in any day you felt there was nothing else to do, Scott. I ought to—skip it. No sense your coming downtown now, I won't be here. On my way to the *Khan.*"

"Well, I can see you there, if that suits you."

"You'll still have to come in and sign your statement, but the *Khan* would suit me. I want to talk to you."

"Something up?"

"Yeah, something's up, all right." He paused. "It's a little after nine-thirty now. I'll be out before ten. Meet me at the entrance."

"I'll be there."

I hung up, wondering what was cooking. The way Torgesen had sounded, maybe it was my goose. Well, I'd soon know.

At the *Khan* I parked the Cad myself and stood outside the entrance long enough to smoke two cigarettes, then the black-and-white car pulled up and Torgesen climbed out.

He led me aside to a spot where we were alone and said, "Consider this official, Scott. Friendly, but official."

"Okay."

"When I talked with Mr. Monaco last night, he said he'd hired you to do a job for him, but he didn't go into detail. You want to fill me in? Not only what you're doing, but what you've found out."

I thought about it. "Yeah, I guess so. I'll naturally inform Monaco, but I don't see how he could object to my cooperating with the law. If he's got nothing to hide."

A quick quirk moved Torgesen's lips, but I couldn't tell if it was the start of a smile or a frown. "What did he hire you for?"

"Originally, to find Jeanne Jax, who was then missing."

"Yeah. But what's he paying you to do now?"

"Well, for one thing, to judge a beauty contest—"

Torgesen laughed. He could laugh pretty good when he wanted to. "And for another," I went on, "to find out who killed Miss Jax, and Sardis, wrap everything up." I paused and added glumly, "Preferably by noon."

"Noon when?"

"Noon today."

Yeah, he could laugh *real* good. When tears started drooling out of his eyes and he appeared to be on the verge of a crippling attack, I said, "All right. Look, I think it's funny, too. Will you shut up?"

"Whoo," he yodeled. "That's a real knee-slapper. Well, hell, I'll go on home—"

"Look, you want to hear what I've got to say or don't you?"

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I told him what I'd been doing and also what I'd learned, or thought I'd learned, hitting the high spots. But I was kind of mildly burning, and Torgesen almost but not quite snickered a time or two, so I hit it pretty fast.

When I finished he was quiet for several seconds, and his heavy face got sober. When he spoke there was no amusement at all in his voice.

"I suppose you know about the Sardis money in this joint, the *Kubla Khan?*"

"Sardis money? Ephrim Sardis?"

"Yes, Ephrim Sardis. Don't play dumb with me."

I squinted at him. "Hold it. If I knew what the hell you were talking about I'd tell you. Or, if I didn't want to spill I'd just clam or tell you to shove it. So what are you yakking about? You mean Sardis had some money in this place?"

He glowered at me for several seconds, then made up his mind. "If you don't know, you will soon enough. Your client put three or four hundred thousand in, but that's a drop in a big bucket. The real money was put up by Sardis."

I blinked at him. "You mean Monaco doesn't own the *Kubla Khan?*"

"Own it?" Torgesen grinned, muscle bunching at the corners of his mouth. "Hell, all he's ever been is a front for Ephrim Sardis." He

paused and added, with emphasis, but still grinning, "The dead guy."

XV

I ROLLED THAT around in my head for a while trying to digest the news, but it nearly gave me indigestion.

It seemed Ormand Monaco was something of a fraud. At least he was taking bows which should have been somebody else's. And I had not forgotten Jeanne's trip to his home; the fact that he'd not been there to meet me last night; the further fact that he'd been seen near the Sardis estate at, or very near, the time of the murder; his phoney reaction when told of Sardis' death. Among other things.

My client. That was nice.

"How'd you find that out?" I asked Torgesen.

"We went through the papers in Sardis' safe, looking for something that might turn up a motive for the homicide. Found an agreement between Sardis and Monaco, signed by both of them and witnessed by their attorneys. All it really means, so far, is that Sardis put up the millions but stayed in the background

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—he never did like personal publicity—and Monaco would be the front man, known to the public as the owner." He paused. "You sure you didn't know about this, Scott?"

"Yes, I'm sure. I'm not going to tell you again, Torgesen." He grinned and I asked him, "Anybody else with money in the *Khan?*"

"Not so far as we know."

"Well, now Sardis is dead, who becomes the owner?"

"We're not sure of that yet. Ordinarily it would be his daughter, although his parents are still living, and there's an ex-wife back East somewhere. We haven't turned up the will yet—seems he had a New York firm handle that for him. But we should have a copy this afternoon."

"Any kind of partnership insurance between him and Monaco? You know, if one dies the other takes over, or winds up with a fat chunk of cash?"

"Not so far as we know. We're still checking, and going through the papers Sardis had in his safe. You should see the tons of junk. Not to mention thirty thousand bucks. I should have a safe like that."

"Thirty G's? In cash?"

"Yeah. Funny thing, though, Supposed to be fifty thousand. Mr. Vail told us about that while we were out there. Also, his wife corroborated it, said her father always had fifty thousand in the safe, for emergencies. Pocket money for a guy like him, I suppose."

"What happened to the other twenty thousand?"

He pursed his heavy lips. "Nobody's been able to tell us that."

I said slowly, "This thirty thousand clams. Was it by any chance in C-notes?"

He smiled without joy. "All in hundred dollar bills. You'll make an investigator yet, Scott."

I thought about what he'd told me, then I said, "I suppose you're here to have a chat with Monaco?"

"That's right."

"Mind if I sit in?"

He pursed his lips, finally said, "Okay."

"Incidently, since Monaco is paying me to find out who knocked off Sardis—money, naturally, which should go to the Sergeant Torgesen Memorial Fund—it seems highly unlikely that he plugged Sardis himself."

"Unlikely, maybe. Not highly. Well, let's see what the man has to say."

We found Monaco in his office, which was much like Jerry Vail's but twice as big—after all, Monaco was the multi-millionaire owner of the *Kubla Khan*. The sergeant and I sat near his desk and Torgesen simply told Monaco what he knew, what he'd just been telling me. He didn't fancy it up, or start in with sly questions, just laid it out and then said, "What about it?"

Monaco had been studying the

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top of his desk while listening, and it was a few more seconds before he raised his head. He glanced at me, then looked at Sergeant Torgesen.

"Nothing," he said. "It's all true, of course. Naturally I realized, as soon as I heard of Ephrim's death, that this would have to come out. I suppose it doesn't really make much difference now."

"Is that all you want to say, Mr. Monaco?"

"Yes, Sergeant. I see no reason for amplification. I have committed no crime."

Torgesen looked deliberately at me, then leaned back in the chair and crossed his legs. "Now that your—your partner is dead, who really and legally owns the *Kubla Khan?*"

"Neyra, I presume. My interest is protected. That is, I shall suffer no financial loss. As for Ephrim's investment, its disposal was entirely up to him."

"In other words, you don't benefit at all by his death."

"Not at all. On the contrary, I've lost a friend."

"You still maintain you were just driving around out at the Sardis estate?"

"Not at the Sardis estate. Past it. Yes, just driving, we've been through this many times already, Sergeant."

Torgesen said, "Frankly, Mr. Monaco, when I informed you of Mr. Sardis' death, I wasn't completely satisfied that the information was a surprise to you."

"Your complete satisfaction is not my primary concern, Sergeant." Monaco's tone was chillier than a fan in the freezer. He was quiet for a few moments, then went on, "When I employed Mr. Scott I offered him a substantial consideration should he be able satisfactorily to conclude his investigation before—within a very short time."

He looked at me and continued, "My motive should be more clear to you now, Scott. It was my rather forlorn hope that this matter could be laid to rest, and any possible onus removed from me personally, before discovery of the agreement between Ephrim and me." He shrugged. "I knew it would be found within a few hours, a day at the most."

Sergeant Torgesen was making faint strangled noises, and his fat face was getting a little red.

There was silence for a few seconds, then Monaco said, "Are you all right, Sergeant?"

"Yes, I'm—all right." He got himself under control and said abruptly, "What about Jeanne Jax?"

"I don't understand."

"When did you meet her?"

"I've told you that. Here at the hotel Wednesday morning."

"Never saw her before?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"Now that you've had time to

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think about it, can you name anyone who might have wished Mr. Sardis dead?"

Monaco shook his head. "I can add nothing to what I've already said."

"All right. Thank you, Mr. Monaco."

The interrogation was over, just like that. I wondered if Torgesen knew something I didn't know: It was quite likely. He stood up, nodded at me, then went out.

"Be nice if you'd told me," I said to Monaco.

"Don't lecture me, Scott."

"Who's lecturing? I repeat, it would be nice if you'd told me about the setup between you and Sardis. The more I know the more chance I have of getting lucky. Some time this year."

He brushed a hand along the thick gray hair over his temple. "Do you think Sergeant Torgesen actually suspects me of murder?"

"Hell, I suspect you. He'd be a fool if he didn't."

"Mr. Scott," he flared up, "you speak entirely—"

"Relax. You asked me. Tell me, was it really a big surprise to you to learn Sardis had been shot?"

"You heard what I told the sergeant."

"Uh-huh. I'll give you ten to one he didn't believe you. Either."

"Don't you have anything else to do, Mr. Scott?"

"Lots of things. I'm doing some of them right now. Like I wanted to ask you about a party you attended a few weeks ago. At the Beverly Hills Hotel. Some of the talent search finalists, the ones already chosen, were there. You were with Sardis and the Vails, I believe."

"That is correct. What do you want to know?"

"Why were you all there? Just for fun?"

"Parties are no longer much fun for me, Mr. Scott. They are part of my business. Specifically, to reach agreement with Mr. Leaf on final details of the contest to be held here. The amount of moneys and other considerations, and especially the role or roles in his television series which would be awarded, and to whom they would be awarded."

"You mean which of the girls present would get the goodies?"

"You are a cynic, aren't you? The specific individuals were not then and are not yet known, since the contest here has not been judged. I meant it was necessary to decide whether only the first-place finisher would be awarded a role, or if some of the runners-up might also expect similar though less promising opportunities." He sighed. "The information was necessary not only that we might advise the contestants themselves, but for our advertising and publicity. Does that meet with your approval?"

I ignored the barb. "Would you

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mind telling me why Mr. Sardis didn't want it known he was the real owner of the *Kubla Khan?"*

"Yes. But I shall tell you anyhow. There really should be little mystery about it. For a number of years, as you may know, I lived and worked in Hollywood. I'm well known there, have many contacts, many friends. I am fairly intimate with numerous individuals, some wealthy, many of considerable influence, not only in Hollywood but in Washington, D.C., New York, Florida, Europe, much of the world. As the apparent owner of the *Kubla Khan* I could expect a friendly and effective press, many famous guests, an enormous amount of free publicity. Does that not impress you as sensible?"

"I guess so. A little crooked, but sensible enough, I suppose."

He flushed a little. But he merely said, "Perhaps there is a slight deception involved, but nothing which should occupy such an inordinate amount of your attention, Scott."

I shrugged. Maybe, maybe not.

Monaco went on, "There was also this—perhaps even more important—motive. Ephrim was actually quite a shy man. He had a genius for making money, in varied fields, but he did not enjoy meeting people. I do." He stopped, scowled, and added, "Usually."

I grinned and stood up. "Okay. I'll get to work."

Sergeant Torgesen was in the lobby. He spotted me and walked over. "Hey, Scott."

"Yeah?"

"What's a onus?"

I grinned, remembering that several times Monaco had stressed his desire to have it removed from him. "Probably not what you're thinking," I said.

"You're a big help."

"Well, this probably won't be any help, either, but there's something I forgot to tell you."

"Oh?" Torgesen looked suspicious.

"Don't jump to conclusions," I said. "I just forgot. And you were doing most of the talking—and laughing—when we met here, anyway. The thing is, last night I saw a guy chinning with one of the beauty contest gals, name of Carol Shearing, and when I talked to her she said he was asking her about Jeanne Jax."

"So?"

"So that's all. I figured you'd want to hear about anyone checking on the late Jeanne."

"You figured right. Nothing else about him?"

"I don't know his name. Saw him, but I don't know who he is. Haven't see him since."

"Let me know if you find out anything else."

"Sure thing."

Torgesen looked at his watch, then away and back at it again in a very hammy double-take. "Goodness," he said, "it's after

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ten-thirty in the morning. Hadn't you better get busy?"

"Not yet eleven-thirty?" I said soberly. "Then there's no hurry."

He said a short, highly expressive word, and it is a good thing he said it softly because there were ladies in the lobby.

Then he said, "See you around, Scott," and walked off.

I strolled through the lobby and outside, and blinked.

Not from the sudden brightness of sunlight. But because the man I'd just been talking to Torgesen about was not ten yards away.

The big beefy character I'd shoved back into his chair last night in the *Seraglio,* and later spotted talking to Carol Shearing, stood with his thick legs spread, hands in his hip pockets and his coat pulled back over that beer-barrel-sized belly, talking to another man. The other man was Jerry Vail.

XVI

I WALKED over to them and said, "Hi, Jerry."

He glanced around. "'Lo, Shell."

"Want to introduce me to your friend?"

Maybe he was Jerry's friend but he was sure no friend of mine. Not if I could read between the lines of his expression.

"Who?" Jerry said. "Oh, this is Warren Phelps. We just met." He performed the introduction, anyway.

"Mr. Phelps and I met last night," I said. "Sort of." Neither of us offered to shake hands.

"He's anxious to get in touch with Miss Jeanne Jax," Vail said, and added, with a glance at me, "I told him I hadn't seen her but would, ah, let him know if I did."

"Uh-huh. Seems reasonable," I said.

Jerry nodded at Warren Phelps and me. "I'll be in my office most of the day, except for the ribbon-cutting at noon. You'll be there, of course, Shell?"

"I imagine so."

"You really should be. Don't you have a meeting pretty quick?" He looked at his watch again. "Nearly eleven now."

"Meeting? Oh, yeah." The meeting of contest judges, I remembered. Instructions, clarification of judging method, and such. A girl gets demerits if she bakes a cake. I wasn't wild about going to the meeting, but Monaco had instructed me to go. I kind of begrudged the time it would take.

Jerry nodded again and strolled away.

Phelps started to walk off too, but I said, "Just a minute."

So far he hadn't opened his mouth. I stepped up by him again and said, "Mind telling me just why you're so anxious to see Miss Jax?"

"Yeah, I mind."

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"Okay. You can tell the fuzz, then."

The brows pulled down over his eyes. "Why would cops be interested?"

I shrugged. "As Mr. Vail just indicated, Miss Jax doesn't seem to be around. They'll be interested in that. In fact, I'll have to tell Sergeant Torgesen you were asking Mr. Vail about her. Asking Carol Shearing last night. And a flock of others, for all I know."

He was quiet for several seconds, looking past my shoulder. Then he decided, apparently, to become somewhat more communicative. "Hell," he said, "it's natural enough I'm interested in where she is. I was supposed to see Jeanne last night. At least she was supposed to call me about seeing her. Today too."

He stopped. I didn't say anything, just waited. Finally he went on, "We're supposed to get married. Maybe."

"Maybe?"

"Well, if she ever gets unhitched."

"I heard she was already married."

"She was. Still is, I guess. The big son took off, left her."

"When was this?"

"Year or more back. What's it to you?"

"Let's say I am a friend of Sergeant Torgesen's."

He scowled again. Mr. Phelps didn't seem to be in love with the fuzz. I said, "What's her husband's name?"

I thought he wasn't going to answer, but finally he said, "Maurice. Maurice Boutelle."

"You know where they were married? And when?"

"San Jose, she told me. Maybe a couple years ago. She was Jeanne Curtis then."

"So why didn't she call herself Jeanne Boutelle? Or even Curtis?"

"Ah, she had stars in her eyes. Some press agent sold her on the Jax handle. Better screen name, more punch, that kind of line."

"Her husband took a powder? Ran out on her?"

Phelps nodded slowly. "With about seven thousand bucks she'd made, at that. From modeling, mostly." He paused. "We were getting along real good. I'd sure like to know. You got any idea where she's at?"

"Afraid I can't help you there. But I might want to talk to you again. You staying here at the *Khan?*"

He shook his head, gave me the name of another local hotel.

When I left Phelps I looked for Torgesen but he'd gone, so I called his office in Indio twice. The first time I didn't get him, but he'd arrived by the time I completed the second call.

I passed on what I'd learned from Phelps and he said, "Thanks for the information, Scott. I already knew she was Jeanne Bou-

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telle—info from DMV. The missing registration slip slowed us down, but not much. It was her own car she was driving. Didn't know the husband's name, though."

"I suppose you'll check with San Jose?"

"Right away. Jeanne Curtis and Maurice Boutelle—married about two years ago, you said?"

"Roughly. Phelps couldn't pin it down any closer. Sergeant, when you get word back, I'd much appreciate anything available on the husband., Age, description, you know, the works."

"We'll see," he said. "I'll be in touch with you later today anyhow."

"Right. I don't suppose you could get the information in the next half hour."

It was a joke, of course. He thought it very funny.

I hung up on him.

I dialed Misty Lombards' number. She answered with a soft, sweet, hot hello that went in to my marrow, and cooked it, and there ensued a little jolly dialogue which need not be here reported.

Then I said, "Honey, I hear they cut the big ribbon and make some smashing speeches at noon. How about going to the ceremonies with me, to relieve their inevitable dullness?"

"I'd like to, Shell. But I can't."

"Can't?"

"I'm going with somebody else. He called only a few minutes ago. If you'd phoned me ten minutes sooner I'd have said yes. You shouldn't have neglected me all morning."

"Neglected you? Dear, I thought—who are you going with?"

"I'm not supposed to say."

"Not supposed to *say?* What does that mean?"

"He asked me not to say anything about it, that's all. He's going to pick me up just before noon and he'll explain everything then—some kind of special ceremony, I gathered. And I'm to be part of it."

And there was some more jolly dialogue, which need not be here reported. After a few moments Misty said, "I've got to hang up. I'll see you at the meeting, anyway. I'm just leaving."

"Yeah, well, I'll save you a seat."

"I'll be sitting with Mr. Leaf."

"Are you trying to avoid me?"

She laughed again. "Not really. I'll see you later, Shell." She added something dandy, and I hung up still smiling—but wondering, too, with whom she was going to the ribbon cutting. And why she was supposed to say nothing about it.

But the time was ticking close to eleven, so I headed for the Executive Room where what I expected would be a hugely dull meeting was about to start. I was right; it was about to start, and it was hugely dull.

I did meet some of the other

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judges, including a New York fashion designer with a toothbrush mustache which looked as if it had been used to clean too many teeth, and his most celebrated high-fashion model, who was not quite as tall as I, and weighed nearly as much as my left leg.

Misty came in with Simon Leaf. She gave me a smile but no words, and he gave me a nod and a curt, "Morning, Scott." Then they proceeded, still talking animatedly, to their seats.

I found my own seat. It was a good ten feet from Misty's. Things weren't working out so well. I wondered if it was an omen.

Simon Leaf stepped to the front of the Executive Room, stood behind a small lectern, and gazed upon us with the air of the first man to espy, through shrouds and mists, the distant shores of North America.

"Dignity," he said.

He continued to gaze upon the foaming surf, spreading lands, rising mountains.

"Dignity," he said again.

Well, this wasn't much so far, I thought. I leaned over and tried to catch Misty's eye.

"Psst," I said. Didn't work this time, either.

"Dignity!" cried Simon Leaf.

Shee, I thought. Some speech.

"That is my message to you this morning," said Simon Leaf. "My entire message is contained in that one word."

Those *three* words, I mentally amended. He should have quit when he was even.

"The eyes of the world are upon us!" he sang. "What we say here may not be long remembered, but what we do here . . . ah." He'd lost his place. "Ah, uh." He rolled his eyes around. Maybe from where he stood he could see not merely the coast of California, but clear to South America.

Clearly he was a man with scads of vision.

"A great responsibility lies upon us. Each of us, individually and collective, represents the *Kubla Khan,* the flower of youthful, vital, shapely, sex—ah, uh. Youthful, innocent womanhood. And . . ." His eyes rolled again. "And—Simon Leaf Productions!"

Well, of course, that was the high point of the meeting. After Simon Leaf the other specific instructions were terribly anticlimatic.

But it was ended before eleven-thirty, and after failing to disengage Misty from Simon Leaf, I left, not too reluctantly.

Lyssa Weldon's room was an outside room in the *Khan's* north wing. This time, instead of phoning I walked over there, filling my lungs with clean desert air on the way, and pressed the button at 218 and rang her bell.

She was in this time.

And though she did not press my button, she also rang *my* bell.

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XVII

THE DOOR cracked and one of those big eyes, dark and brown but with a flicker of hot green in it, peeked around its edge at me.

Then the eye widened further and she opened the door saying, "Shell, love. I thought maybe it was Bull. But it's too early for Bull."

"Maybe it's too early for me."

I guessed she was fresh from the shower, for there were tiny sparkling diamonds of wetness in her short black hair.

Lyssa corroborated at least one of my deductions by saying, "I just jumped out of the shower. Getting ready for when they cut the ribbon thing. Come on in."

"In the shower?"

She laughed. "You can shower if you want. But I'm all through."

"Yeah. Well, I guess I'm all washed up myself. But I don't mind coming in, don't mind if I do."

And in I went. "Close the door quick," I said, "so we don't get trampled in the rush."

"Rush?"

"There may be guys out there watching. Lock and bar the door, shove the bed against it. I'll shoot the first six guys inside."

"Oh, not the bed, love," she said. "Shut your eyes."

"What for? They just got here."

"So I can fix my towel."

I did it, and did not even peek, until she said, "Okay, now I'm all covered." I took a good look and said, "That is a matter of opinion."

The towel went under her arms and concealed the vital third of her splendidly shapely body from the swell of her breasts to about halfway or maybe merely quarterway down her sleek thighs, but left all the rest, including her rounded shoulders and upper bulge of bosom bare as a baby's bottom and in fact much barer than that.

"I'll get dressed in a minute," she said. "I suppose you want to know if I talked to Bull Harper."

"Yeah, that was it."

"I did. He said Jeanne saw him, and told him she'd tried to see Mr. Sardis but couldn't get an appointment with him. She asked Bull to fix it for her."

"Did he fix it?"

"I don't know. He wouldn't tell me. He's funny—if he gets tired of talking about anything, he's tired. You can't budge him at all."

"I had a hunch he was like that. When did Jeanne talk to Bull?"

"It was late on Thursday. She went out to the place to see him."

"The Sardis estate, you mean?"

"Yes. You want a Martini?"

"What?"

"You want a Martini? I made some just before I jumped in the shower."

"Well, I don't usually drink Martinis at noon. But—yeah, maybe I'd better. Just one."

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"Whoever heard of just one?" she said, and heat lightning flickered in those almost-virginal eyes. "I made a whole pitcher."

"So start pitching."

While she poured to the clink of ice in the pitcher—wrong way to make Martinis, by the way; you should never leave the ice in the pitcher—I said, "Did Jeanne tell Bull why she wanted to see Sardis?"

"No. He asked her about that, but she didn't say exactly why. You'll have to drink from this big old glass; don't have any of the cute little ones. Sit down and rest your bones. We've got a couple minutes."

Couple minutes for what? I wondered. But I sat on the edge of the bed after taking the nearly full water glass she'd handed me.

It was a small room, the neatly made bed in one corner, low dresser of dark carved wood against a wall, little stained-bamboo bar in the corner on my right, and straight ahead the half open door of the bath. I could see a dark red bath mat on the floor and an edge of the shower stall.

I swallowed about a half-ounce of the Martini and went up an inch off the bed. Maybe you should leave the ice in.

"Glaa," I said, involuntarily.

"They all right?" Lyssa asked me. "Maybe I made them too strong."

"Fine," I said. "Glaa, fine. Just don't rub two of them together."

"I can't remember if I put the Vermouth in. Does it taste like it?"

"How can you tell? Beats me. In a minute, though, it won't make much difference. Glaa. It's—it's *swell.*" I'd had another half-ounce by this time. "Bet this would cure ulcers. They'd close right up like dying sea anemones."

We yacked about nothing, for a bit, then I said, "Lyssa."

"Yes, Shell?"

"What else did Bull tell you?"

"Only what I said. Jeanne wanted to see Mr. Sardis pretty bad, and asked Bull to arrange it if he could. Told him Mr. Sardis would really want to talk to her. She said another thing, I remember. Said it was about his daughter, and that's why he'd want to talk to her."

"Sardis' daughter? Neyra?"

"I guess it must've been. Bull told me she just said it was about his daughter. And for Bull to tell him that."

"Interesting. Look, when you see Bull again do try to find out if he arranged for Jeanne to see Sardis, will you?"

"Sure. I'll see him pretty quick. And I'd better get some clothes on, too." She tilted her make-do Martini glass and said, "That's very, very good."

And then she was standing before me, pitcher in hand, leaning over, starting to pour. She'd tied the towel behind her in a knot which must have been loose to be-

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gin with, and which unless my eyes were deceiving me was getting looser. She'd been moving around, getting and pouring Martinis, and —There was no doubt about it. She was coming undone.

I said, "Lyssa!" and she, becoming suddenly aware, cried, "Oh!" and grabbed for the towel.

Well, it was a mess.

She'd been pouring those horrible Martinis, and I'd been holding my glass out there, and when she yelled and grabbed for the towel the pitcher in her hand clunked the glass in mine and in an instant it was raining gin. It was a Martini-burst. Lyssa was crying "Oh!" for the second time, and grabbing— and missing.

Suddenly it was over, but it had been a hell of a two seconds. Pitcher and glass lay on the floor. Near the crumpled white towel. Lyssa was still reaching for the towel, which of course was not where she was reaching. And I was part way up onto my feet, leaning forward and kind of clutching, in what remained of my effort to help Lyssa.

For a few more seconds we stayed in that rather strained position. Part of the reason for my temporary paralysis was the suddenness and shock of the spilled Martinis. But most of it was caused by the sight of Lyssa, nude, a foot from me, bending toward me and, now, slowly straightening up.

I don't know what would have happened right then—though I've a pretty damn good idea—because at that instant something strange began seeping into my consciousness. Strange, and wet. As though something strange and wet was seeping into my pants.

So, I thought, that's where the Martinis went.

The Martinis—or whatever they'd been.

"Lyssa," I said in a wondering tone, "that gin bottle . . . It sort of dunked me all over, if you get the idea."

She took a look and got practical. "You'd better take your pants off."

"We've got to *do*— What?"

"You'd better take your pants off."

"That's what I thought you said."

"Take them off and I'll iron it out for you."

"You must be kidding."

"It'll only take a minute. I'll just steam it out for you."

"Will that help?"

She stamped her foot. *"Take off your pants!"*

"Well, hell," I said, and started taking my pants off, "if you're for it, I'm for it."

Lyssa grabbed my pants and walked away. I hadn't paid real attention to what she was doing, since my mind had been entirely occupied with my own problems. But now I noted that she'd set up a little portable ironing board and

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had a steam iron resting on it. She draped my keen pants with their little red stripes over an end of the ironing board.

"Lyssa," I said, "you're lovely. Especially in that getup."

She smiled and her eyes flashed. "It is rather chic, isn't it?"

"Baby, it is the chic of Araby. You know, with you in that outfit and me in my maharajah suit, we make quite a blinding couple, what?"

"Especially right now, love," she said.

Lyssa turned to face me, moistening her lush red lips with the tip of her tongue, and I almost imagined I heard a little *spat* like when a woman wets a finger and taps it on an iron.

There was something in the air, something different; it seemed suddenly more dense, more still. Something I liked.

I looked at her eyes, and there seemed more green than ever now in their smoky darkness. Her full lips, moistened by the quick caress of her tongue, moved almost imperceptibly.

Then she moved that last half step toward me—and there was an astounding noise at the door.

"Did you hear that?" I asked Lyssa. In a whisper.

It was easy to note every nuance of her changing expression, of which there were plenty. "Did I hear it?" she whispered.

"I don't suppose you did it," I whispered sadly. "No such luck, huh?"

"Of course not."

"I'll bet it's the man from Porlock."

"Who?"

"Never mind."

It happened at the door again.

"Sounds like something wild trying to break in, doesn't it?" I said.

"He never rings the bell."

"He—who? As if I didn't know."

"I think you'd better do something, Shell."

"Yeah. Good thinking. Should have thought of that myself. But—like what?"

She stepped back and turned away from me, then stood in the middle of the room kind of half on tiptoe, leaning toward the door, and called, "Just a minute. Who is it?"

A voice like thunder in a tunnel bellowed, "Who you expecting, the King of Siam?"

XVIII

"SHELL," LYSSA whispered, "Get under the bed."

I figured she didn't have to do all the thinking.

"Wait a second, Bull," she called. "I just got out of the shower."

"Hoo," he said.

Then she opened the door.

I could see the back of Lyssa's legs about up to the calves; her pret-

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ty feet; and see the door open; and see, clumping inside, two other feet, which weren't pretty. They were sure big, though. I could also see some of his pinkish costume-trousers and part of a big jeweled scabbard for his big sharp scimitar.

"You supposed to *be* ready. I told you I'd be here quarter of noon."

"I—forget." She paused, then said, "You'd better wait outside for me, Bull, honey. While I get into costume."

"Okay, Lyssa baby."

I started to heave a big sigh of relief. But only started.

Because Bull said, "You better shake a leg. I'll wait . . . hey."

"What?"

"Hey! What's that I see?"

Yeah, what could he have seen which would put that savage bestial note into his voice? That growling, animal, murderous note?

"Is them pants?" he said.

I felt faint. How could I have forgotten my pants?

"What in hell you doin'," Bull said, "pressin' a man's pants?"

"Bull, you're not jealous!"

"Hoo! If you think I ain't, you ain't thinkin'. Where is he at? I'll kill him. I'll fix him so he wears skirts. I'll pull his limb off his limbs. I'll—"

"Bull, there's nobody here but you and me," she lied smoothly. It was what I think of as a little white lie. "Those are my brother's pants."

Bull was sure a suspicious fellow. Actually, I couldn't blame him. I'd be suspicious myself if I saw a guy's pants on my girl's ironing board.

It was getting pretty thick out there, but then Lyssa had an inspiration. At least she changed the subject.

"Bull, honey," she said soothingly. "You remember I asked you about that girl, Jeanne? Jeanne Jax."

"Yeah, but—"

"You listen to me. You said she wanted you to arrange for her to meet Mr. Sardis. Did you?"

"What's so—"

"Bull, I wouldn't ask if it wasn't important. It is! And I'll never speak to you again, I'll never—"

"Okay, don't flip. Yeah, I talked to him and he said he'd like to see her. So I told her."

"When was that?"

"It was Thursday, late, when she asked me, like I told you before. Mr. Sardis set it up for her to come in and see him at half past three Friday. Yesterday. She called out in the morning yesterday and talked to me, I was on the gate then, and I told her it was okay."

He was quiet for a few moments. "I had to go back at three-thirty and let her in—you can't open the gate, except from inside, without the key—which is why I couldn't pick you up till right after then."

"All right, Bull. If you'll just wait—"

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"Shh."

"What's the matter?"

"Be quiet, I'm thinkin'. Yeah. I got it He was asking me all them questions. About her, and Mr. Sardis. Him! *Him!* That big white-haired monkey. Shell Scott! Him!"

"Bull! If you don't quit it, I'll never *speak* to you again."

"There is something familiar about those pants."

He stopped suddenly. His big feet were approximately a yard from my head. "What's all this on the floor?" he said. "That pitcher, and ice—and a glass. Two glasses. *Two glasses?"*

Blimey, I thought, now we're for it. I should never have had a Martini with Lyssa. I should never have had anything with Lyssa. I should have given up girls a long time ago. No, I amended, not that; I'd rather die; which is probably how it's going to work out.

"And there's that bottle of gin I gave you. Empty. You drank it? You drank it all?"

Presumably you weren't supposed to drink it. Most likely you weren't supposed to smell it. Even from a distance. It was a decoration, like a vase. And Bull himself was responsible. He'd bought it. Or won it. Or made it. You cheapskate, I thought. You mad poisoner, you.

I balled up a fist and looked at it. Not as big as Bull's, but a reasonably lethal instrument nonetheless. And I had two of them to his four. Practically even. I was at a disadvantage under the bed, of of course. Not to mention the fact that I'd feel a bit sheepish if he peeked under here and spotted me.

I saw the fuzzy white towel fall and crumple on the floor. That made once accidentally and twice on purpose. Or maybe, I mused three times on purpose. Whichever, Bull Harper knew when to quit arguing. . . .

OKAY, I told myself, let's go over it again. Let's go over this here case from the beginning. Must be several clues just waiting to be grabbed and put into the right places, maybe enough to complete the puzzle. Besides, there wasn't much else for me to do.

I drew a little line on the damp carpet under my nose, and watched as a drop of moisture fell from my nose onto the mark. Probably couldn't do that again if I tried.

Six minutes to go. Five minutes now. Something . . . Something about the time, just before noon, wiggled a little tendril in my brain. It was a worrying little wiggle, but I couldn't figure out what had caused it.

Well, I thought, let's go over it again.

There's the Jeanne Jax bit. On arriving she had first talked to Ormond Monaco—assuming, always, that Monaco hadn't been lying to me, with deliberation and expert-

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ness, which was more than possible—and had noted Neyra Vail and Jerry, had later asked some of the girls about Neyra Vail and Sardis, and had as the day progressed confined her questions, so far as I'd been able to determine, to Sardis, Ephrim Sardis.

At the end, by the time she got to Bull Harper, she'd asked Bull to arrange a meeting for her with Mr. Sardis—and, according to what Lyssa had just wangled from Bull, had actually shown up for that meeting yesterday at three-thirty P.M.

What had occurred then I couldn't know, but maybe I could sort of guess.

Sardis had been shot and killed around four-thirty p.m.—at least that was when the call to the sheriff had been logged, the call reporting the sound of a gunshot. Four-twenty-eight P.M., I recalled.

Unless Jeanne's killer—and Sardis' murderer, too—was somebody I didn't know or hadn't met, the people closest to the case were Ormand Monaco, Jerry Vail, Warren Phelps, and Bull Harper. Bull was out. He hadn't killed anybody. Not with a gun. In the first place, I believed he had met Lyssa yesterday shortly after three-thirty p.m., at least well before the sound of that gunshot had been reported. Further, I thought if it had been Bull running up over Moss Mountain late Friday I'd have been impressed by the size and bulk of him. No, for my money, Bull was out.

Which left Jerry and Ormand and Warren. And, conceivably, Neyra Vail herself, though that wasn't likely. I'd have to talk to Neyra, when I got a chance.

Back to Jeanne, the crux of it.

She'd been married, saw her estranged hubby here at the *Khan*. According to Phelps, the hubby had left her, taken a powder—with some of her loot, at that. But according to Misty Lombard, Jeanne had said, at least at first, that they were merely estranged.

Misty— That wiggle in my skull again. And the worry, growing.

Then through the convolutions of my brain like a small bright worm wriggled the thought: If either Vail or Monaco happened to be the murderer, and had listened to Misty answering my questions about Jeanne in that ersatz interrogation . . .

Four minutes till noon. And everybody would be there. Except Bull and Lyssa. And, of course, me.

Back to Vail and Monaco, I told myself. Okay, assume one of them was the murderer—and sapped me, tried to kill me last night. Would there have been any reason, any motive, for that same man to try to kill Misty? And, if so, wouldn't he have tried to kill her later that same night? It was possible, and if what was beginning to go through my mind now made

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sense, it was even probably. Except . . . Of course. Except that I had been with Misty last night.

I couldn't keep my thoughts from Misty. The worry about her was growing, starting to chill my guts. I still didn't know why, hadn't pinned it down, but I had sense enough to know if that chill fear was growing then there was a reason for it. Buried somewhere in memory or my subconscious maybe, or even pushed aside by the events of these last minutes; but there, and real.

Wait a second. Go at it another way. Suppose, just suppose there is one person with reason, with motive—now—not only to kill me but Misty as well. Who would that person have to be; and why the need to get rid of us both?

I was getting closer to the answer, and then I thought of something else.

Last night would sure have been the time for the murder of Misty Lombard, if I'd not been with her. Everything dark, nobody around. And then came another worm of thought, an ugly one this time: It wouldn't have to be dark.

That last worm of thought stayed in my mind: It wouldn't have to be dark. Just a time when nobody was around. A time when all the guests and most of the help were gathered before the wide entrance of the *Kubla Khan*. A time when somebody was going to meet Misty at her suite, "just before noon."

A time like—right now.

XIX

SLOWLY, like a lone guerrilla crawling through regiments of the enemy, I moved out from under the bed. I was aimed toward the door and I crept another foot toward it before rising slowly, noiselessly to my knees. And my knee popped.

Pop.

Well, I thought, *that* tore it. There wasn't even time for very many sickening thoughts.

Big old Bull had got that great head of his cranked around all the way and his wide and staring eyes were full upon me.

Well, words cannot tell it. But if you have ever seen a guy get hit on the head with a truck, you've an idea of what happened to his eyeballs, in which little veins appeared to be preparing to pop.

Boy something really good had to be done.

Never had there been a sight more fiendishly designed to glaze over eyeballs, to make the brain go, faintly, *pfft*, like cigarettes dropped into the toilet.

Hoo-boy, I thought. I'm going to get killed. At least.

I leaped to the door and through it and skidded on grass as I turned right, but kept my feet and then really got them going,

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moving like little five-toed dynamoes, and as I ran those earlier ugly thoughts came back to me—Misty, and murder. I was moving about as fast as it's possible for me to move, but the thoughts seemed to add even more power to my legs and feet and by the time I reached the hotel's front edge I was flying like a startled bird. I'd been thinking, too. Maybe not enough, but thinking.

I'd been thinking time was so short that the only hope was for me to get from Lyssa's room to Misty's suite in the shortest, most direct, and fastest way. Both were outside rooms, not among those which overlooked the inner court and pool, and they were in opposite wings of the *Kubla Khan*, Lyssa's almost at the end of the North Wing and Misty's, clear over in the South Wing of the hotel.

The shortest, fastest way then was, logically, along the slanting outer edge of the North Wing, then to my right and across in front of the hotel, right again and down the South Wing to Misty's suite, and Misty. And whoever else was there.

Yells from behind me? There seemed to be some kind of yelling going on ahead of me, too, but I whipped my head around first toward those blood-curdling ones.

Bull.

Of course.

Yeah, I remembered him.

He was tearing along after me with his mouth wide open and from it was issuing such a horrendous cacophony you'd think it would have required at least a quartet being boiled in oil to equal its magnificence. But, more important, he carried in his left hand, fluttering from his fist like the banner of a maniacal nudist leaping joyously into battle, my keen pants with their little red stripes.

And in his other hand, high overhead and glittering in the sunlight, the now-unsheathed blade of that hideous scimitar which was part of what had until very recently been his costume. It was clear as could be that Bull Harper intended to catch up with me and cut me in two or perhaps several.

I didn't want to shoot Bull unless I had to, but I grabbed for the .38 Colt Special in my shoulder holster. No shoulder holster. No gun. Ah, of course, my gun was in my pants. And you know where my pants were, don't you?

I slipped my head back around so it was headed in the direction toward which my feet were running. Then I knew why music. I knew a hell of a lot more than why music. For example, I realized I'd heard those lots of dandy screams because about, oh, maybe ten yards away were lots of dandy people screaming from their briskly moving toes clear up to their bugging eyeballs.

People—thousands of them. At least it looked like thousands, but

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I knew there were at least a couple of hundred.

As I dug in my heels and started skidding to a stop the band faltered to a stop, there was an *"oom-pah"* and a cymbal clang and a *"boom!"* and then a "boom" and a "pah . . ." and silence. Except, of course, for the screaming. There was plenty of that.

It probably appeared to me that more people were present than truly there were, because so many of them were moving. Jumping, running, spinning about, clapping their eyes, and such. I could see people in costumes, men in business suits, gals in Bikinis. I got a glimpse of several contestants I'd met, lots of strangers, the Mayor, appearing to be preparing to puke, several other familiar and unfamiliar and wretched-looking faces.

Including—yes, on the steps before the *Kubla Khan,* clutching a microphone, looking as if he had just lost by one vote—the Governor of the sunny state of California.

But even over the sound of yells and movement I could hear the thudding of big ugly feet behind me. I plowed through the crowd; no detours; no pausing to say "Excuse me;" just straight ahead going from low to super-high without touching second gear on the way, but not fast enough that I failed to hear Bull's feet right behind me

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and imagine I could hear the hiss of that keen bare blade hissing through the air at my fat head. Boy, it would slice through that fat like a branding iron through butter.

Talk about screams. They'd screamed plenty at just me, but now Bull was here to scream at. Even a couple of men screamed. Bull was, believe me, something to scream at. Especially with that big scimitar waggling around and glittering in the sunlight.

But then I was through them, turning the corner, racing toward Misty's suite. No doubt about it. Bull was the speediest creature outside of a zoo.

I went clear off my feet, hit the ground and skidded, rolled with great presence of mind onto my neck, ear, head, side, hind end, ear again, then knees and feet. Bull had run past me, slowing, got stopped and jumped at me. I just happened to be facing him—finally—twanging like all the strings on an exploding bull fiddle, and I threw back my right arm, shot it forward forming a fist, pivoted and caught his chin just as it came within range.

If it had hurt his chin as much as it hurt my hand and arm, it would have just about killed him. At least it knocked him down, and he went down a little loose this time. The big curved sword flipped from his grasp and skidded a few feet away. He was on his knees and one hand—in which he still clutched my keen pants—and reaching for me with the other hand when I went by him, bent and scooped up the scimitar and kept running.

Fourteen, twelve, ten—Suite 8. Misty's suite.

I didn't slow down to find out if the door was locked. I knew if I hit it solidly with a shoulder it would open, and I hit it hard. There was a sharp grating and cracking noise and the door simply flew inward, and I stumbled inside, falling.

But even as I fell I saw the man's back, his extended arms, his fingers buried in the soft, white throat; saw the squeezing hands and, hanging limply from them, Misty.

XX

I HIT THE floor on my side, skidded, stopped with the hand holding Bull's sword pressed against the carpet. I started trying to scramble to my feet as he turned, not very gracefully this time, not like a man walking on water but one struggling to get out of quicksand.

He was still tall and handsome, but some of the golden blond waves on his head were in disarray, and his face wore the twisted stamp of great shock—and fright.

As he turned he released Misty and she fell like a rag to the divan

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over which he'd been holding her. I couldn't tell if she moved. I had all I could do to watch him because he was jumping toward the door—I thought.

But he merely leaped across the room, getting farther from me, thrusting one hand into a pocket. Thrusting it there for a gun, because as I scrambled to my feet and started toward him he turned and stood with his back to the wall, and light pouring through the open door glanced from the heavy .45 caliber revolver in his fist, probably the same gun he'd used to split my scalp last night.

He flipped the gun's muzzle at me, but I was moving toward him fast and couldn't have stopped if I'd wanted to. I didn't want to. The gun roared and the sound was so loud it felt as if the slug hit my ears, and I felt a shock rip through my body, but I was moving forward and I thrust hard with my arm as I shoved my right leg back as if trying to break through the floor with it, and the point of the scimitar entered Jerry Vail's gut down low and the curved blade sliced into him and up through him and slammed into the plastered wall behind him.

The wall hardly slowed it down. Every ounce of my strength was in the blow. I'd slammed the sword's point at him as if trying to break him in two with my fist, and the steel went right into the wall behid him and didn't stop until the metal guard above my hand thumped against Vail's belly.

His eyes and mouth snapped open and he made a high faint squeaking noise that sounded like a woman screaming ten blocks away. Then his knees bent and buckled; he sagged; and his body's weight pressed down on the blade, and the flesh of his gut parted and spilled blood as he drooped lower until the blade's curved top hit bone and stopped.

He hung there, tilted slowly to his left, head dropping toward his shoulder and then down. He hung there, like a bug on a pin.

I turned toward the divan, and Misty.

She was lying still. I couldn't tell if she was breathing or not. It felt as if my throat was stuck together. I stepped toward the diven—but then there was that familiar thumping and clatter behind me and I heard the big feet crash against the floor and I swung around fast, balling up my right fist and—

I yelled, "Bull, you damned idiot." But he was bending down, reaching for me.

I rolled to my right, hooked my heel behind his ankle and kicked the inside of his kneecap with my left foot. His leg twisted, bent. Down he went with an impact that made the floor and walls shiver. I jumped to my feet, tried to sidestep him as he came up off the carpet, but I wasn't fast enough. He

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charged into me, shoulder slamming my side and his thick arms going around my waist.

We sailed across the room, my back hit the side of the open door and we fell outside, rolling, swinging, pushing, trying to use knees, elbows, anything handy. I got a thumb in the corner of his nose and a finger in his eye and tried to push his head off, and finally his hold broke and he rolled away from me.

"Bull, you damned fool, I yelled. "Listen to me. I just shoved that damned shiv of your's through Jerry Vail and he's hanging inside suite eight like a coat back from the cleaners. He was choking hell out of Misty Lombard."

Bull climbed to his feet. He wasn't listening. He dived at me like a pro tackle and I could feel the wind go out of me as though headed for the far horizon. Before we broke free of each other I'd hit him or whacked him with the edge of my palm half a dozen times and he hadn't clubbed me more than twice as often.

We were standing four or five feet apart. I could feel warm blood streaming from my nose. My lower lip was split and it felt as if my head was puffing. But Bull's brow over one eye was laid open and bloody, and the rest of his face did not look like sculptured perfection. He didn't appear tired, however, and he was edging toward me, fists held ready before him.

"Will you for Pete's sake listen to me?" I yelled. "And forget about Lyssa. I didn't do anything. Well . . . not much. Look, the only way this mess makes sense is that Jeanne was married to Jerry Vail, only he didn't use that name then. He called himself Maurice Boutelle, and maybe something else before that. But when Jeanne saw him here, supposedly married to Neyra Vail, she knew—"

It was no use. Bull was in close and feinted with a left and started to thunder that big right hand at me, but he was a fraction too slow this time. I took a chance the left was just a feint, had time to set myself and gave him everything I could put into a straight, jolting right.

It caught him on the point of the chin and snapped his head back. He swayed off balance, leaned, then toppled like a big tree. He shook his head for a moment, started snarling, his face took on some of those expressions which were still livid in my memory, and he pressed both hands against the ground starting to push himself up.

I was next to him by that time and I shoved down on his shoulder with one hand and said, "Bull, will you please, will you please, put your—my pants on?"

I was starting to get darting reflections of color from all over the area. I'd noticed it moments before, but had figured it must be blood. But now I realized it was

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people. People all over the place, all around us. The crowd, not unnaturally, at that, had followed the commotion, followed Bull and me here.

Bull was beginning to get it, too. Slowly it seeped in, all the way in. He looked around, down at himself, blinked in peculiar fashion at me, looked around again, all the way around.

Then he put on a shy, an almost winsome smile, which was actually about all he could put on at the moment, raised his head high and said something marvelous. At least I thought it was marvelous.

"Folks," he said seriously, "I hope you don't believe this."

Then he cocked his head on one side, as though thinking maybe that hadn't been the precise phrase he was after. Then, zip, he was gone.

Not far. Just into suite 8. But gone. The door slammed, started creaking open on bent hinges. I went in right after him.

And straight to the divan.

One of Misty's hands trembled. Her breasts rose and fell; she was breathing. Her long lashes began quivering. Thank God, I thought; she's alive, still alive.

So, incredibly, was Jerry Vail.

He wasn't moving, wasn't even conscious, but froth bubbled on his lips. There was still some breath in him. The scimitar's top edge was pressed against ribs at the right side of his stomach; it hadn't torn open his heart, but enough of his insides were sliced open that I couldn't imagine him living more than minutes longer. I was surprised he wasn't dead already.

Ormand Monaco stepped inside the room. He looked pale, dishevveled, but in control.

I didn't say anything, just pointed to the bed, then at Jerry Vail stuck on the wall. "He's not dead yet," I said. "Is there a doctor in that bunch out there?" I sighed. "I guess we'll need a few sheriffs, too."

Monaco stepped to the doorway and called something, barked an order or two, then stepped back inside. He shut the door, put a chair against it to keep it closed, then said, "Is there anything you would like to add, Scott?"

"Add? To what?"

"To what you said outside. To Mr. Harper."

"Oh. You heard that, huh?"

A bleak, somewhat sad, sort of the-hell-with-it expression flickered over his thin-featured face. "I imagine," he said dully, "they heard it on top of the mountains. Perhaps it escaped your attention, but you were not speaking in a normal speaking voice. You were not, for that matter, shouting in a normal shout—"

"Yeah," I said. "I remember now. Well, it seems logical enough to me that—to continue what I was shouting— When Jeanne saw Jerry Vail here she must have recog-

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nized him as her husband. Not ex-husband, since they never got divorced. He merely skipped out on her.

"You told me yourself she asked about Neyra when she first got here and seemed quite taken aback when you told her Neyra was with her husband. If I recall what you told me, she said, 'She's his *wife?*' Which would have been natural enough if Jeanne knew she was his wife."

Monaco nodded, pressed a thin hand against the gray hair swelling at his temple. "So the rest of Miss Jax's questions were to gain further information and, eventually, to learn what she could about Ephrim."

"Exactly. When she found out he was loaded with dough, she started thinking she might unload some. If Jeanne was married to Jerry—who thus, of course, was not legally married to Sardis' daughter—she was on top of a situation she could use to build up her bank account. Through a little blackmail. Especially since Neyra Vail was going to have Jerry's baby."

"I'll accept that as logical enough, Scott. But have you any proof, any physical evidence—"

"Yeah. I pinned it to the wall over there."

Monaco glanced "over there" and grimaced, then turned back to me.

I went on, "There'll be plenty more, like the information from a marriage certificate, tracing both Vail and Jeanne back a few years, pinning down where Vail was at the time of the murders—when I first arrived at the *Khan* he wasn't around, and he didn't show up in the *Seraglio* for a while. We'll also see what Misty has to tell us, when she can talk. So now it's your turn."

"What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean. If Jeanne approached Sardis with her story—she did see him yesterday afternoon—and told him she was still married to his daughter's presumed hubby, the first thing Sardis would have done after that would be to call in his daughter's hubby."

"So?"

"Well, unless you knocked off your old buddy Ephrim yourself, it almost had to be Jerry. It isn't likely Jeanne did it. First, she apparently was paid off by Sardis with crisp hundred dollar bills, so she got what she was after. Second, the call to the Sheriff reporting a gunshot at the Sardis estate was from a man. But mainly, from Vail's point of view, once Sardis told him what he'd learned, Jerry had to suffer the consequences—kaput with Neyra, loss of some of the Sardis millions possibly including the *Kubla Khan,* not to mention scandal and prison—or else kill Sardis.

"So, Mr. Monaco, what were you doing out at the Sardis estate? You'll never convince me you did-

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n't know he was dead. It's my guess Vail phoned you—"

"No," he interrupted. "It was Ephrim."

"Sardis phoned you himself?"

"Yes."

I could hear a siren. And there were voices close outside the door.

"What time was that?" I asked Monaco.

"About a quarter after four."

"Uh-huh. How long did it take you to get to the Sardis estate. You did go?"

"Yes, of course. Ephrim said it was of the utmost importance that I come immediately. It took me twenty minutes to get there. He was dead. Shot, slumped over on his desk. At first I didn't know what to do, then I left and drove back home —Well, drove at least to Yucca Road."

"Where Jeanne was already dead. Why was she going to see you?"

"I have no idea."

"She didn't phone you, contact you in any way?"

Monaco shook his head. "Not unless she called my home after I'd left to see Ephrim. I was hoping you might be able to tell me why she was calling on me."

"We can't ask Jeanne," I said, "so we can only guess now. Maybe she'd spotted Jerry behind her and was just running away from him, but I doubt that. I think she *was* on her way to see you, and it's my guess she was going to put the bite on you, too, before she skipped. Grab all she could and blow."

"You mean she might have thought I'd pay to avoid—well, difficulties, scandal, with the opening of the *Kubla Khan* imminent?"

"Something like that. Remember, she probably thought you had nearly as much money as Ephrim Sardis. What else did he tell you on the phone?"

Two men came inside. One of them carried a doctor's black bag and, looking around, didn't have to be told what to do. He merely glanced at Misty, briefly felt her wrist and lifted an eyelid, then walked to what was left of Jerry Vail. I saw him shake his head slightly, then put his bag down and open it.

Monaco said in a quieter tone, "He told me it had to do with his son-in-law, and with the *Kubla Khan*. It was something I, as the person publicly identified with the *Khan,* should know before the opening. That was all, but he did stress the urgency and importance of what he had to tell me."

"Okay. He phoned you at four-fifteen and it took you twenty minutes to get there, which means you would have arrived about four-thirty-five. The law got the call at four-twenty-eight. Pretty close. Jerry must have called them. He should have waited a little longer, but it almost worked."

"What almost worked?"

"Well, you'd been inside and

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were already out of the Sardis house, on your way home before the Sheriff's car arrived and the deputy spotted you. A little later and he would have caught you in there, or leaving, and your goose would have been cooked. Jerry must have known approximately how long it would take the radio car to get there, so he reported hearing a shot at a time he figured would bring the law to the house while you were in it. Obviously he wouldn't have wanted them to get there before you drove up. But he couldn't calculate it close enough, or maybe was just unlucky."

"I see." He paused, delicate gray-flecked brows knit in thought. "You're saying, then, that Jerry shot Ephrim . . . Ah, you mean Jerry must have been present when Ephrim phoned me. He heard Ephrim speak to me on the phone."

"Of course. And therefore knew you were on your way out to see Sardis."

"So Jerry shot Ephrim, waited, then phoned the police at what he hoped was the appropriate moment—"

"Yeah, only he didn't stick around by the dead body while waiting to place his call. You can bet he skipped in a hurry and phoned from someplace else."

Misty moved on the divan.

Monaco and I both stepped over by her. She sighed, blinked her eyes. She moistened her lips, then slowly her eyes opened. She looked first at Monaco, then at me. Terror and pain were still in those violet-shadowed eyes, and it was at least a minute before that nearness-to-death look faded from them. She felt her throat, swallowed a little water, and finally could speak to us in a quiet voice which trembled a little.

We talked for a few moments, and I stood so she couldn't see Jerry Vail—he was flat on the floor now, though it had taken two men to pull the scimitar from the wall, and from him.

When she seemed pretty well in control I said, "Misty, what happened before he—got violent?"

"When he came in he wanted to talk a little. I thought it was about whatever it was he'd mentioned on the phone, the special performance, whatever it—there wasn't any, of course." She stopped, sipped some more water. "He started asking me about Jeanne, the night she spent with me. After quite a lot of other questions he finally asked if Jeanne had mentioned her husband's name. Then I remembered." She rubbed her throat gently."

"Remembered what, Misty?"

"That she had told me, only I guess it didn't make much impression at the time. I couldn't think of it when I talked to you about Jeanne last night. I told Mr. Vail —" Her eyes widened again. "Where is he?"

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"Relax. He's—in good hands. Nothing to worry about. Go on."

"I told him I did remember her telling me. I'd heard the name but couldn't recall it right then."

"Sure, but if you'd heard it he knew you'd probably be able to remember if anybody asked you the right way."

"Well, he asked me himself. Or told me."

"Oh?"

"I mean, he asked me if I'd heard the name Maurice Boutelle. That was it. I remembered then. So of course I told him that was the name Jeanne had mentioned. She'd said her husband, the man she was trying to make sure didn't see her here, was Maurice Boutelle. I even remembered she laughed, as if there were something funny about it. And—" Misty's eyes darkened again, became puzzled. "All of a sudden Mr. Vail started to choke me. Why? Why did he try to kill me?"

"Because Jerry was Maurice Boutelle," I said. "It's a long story. But it's over now."

I got out my pack of cigarettes and lit one. "He was fighting a losing battle, anyway," I said to Monaco. "He was already lost whether he knew it or not. He'd have had to kill two or three other people to have any hope of staying clear. Maybe Warren Phelps, for one—and me. Of course, he did try to kill me. Twice."

I reached up and felt the back

of my head again. Bump was still there. It was a dandy—and my scalp had done some more bleeding. I'd naturally lost my turban somewhere in the last few minutes. I was feeling the sticky, already-coagulating blood—fortunately, I heal fast, I heal like crazy—when Misty cried, "Shell, you're bleeding."

"Yeah, I was just patting—"

"—your leg's all bloody. Where are your trousers?"

Oh, boy, I thought. I'd forgotten about that. Just too damn many things to keep track of.

"Yeah, that's right," I said to Misty, "you missed all the . . . uh."

About then it penetrated that she'd not said my head, but my leg, was all bloody. I looked at it. Bloody? Yuck, it was a gory-looking limb if ever there'd been one. I bent over and examined it the best I could. That one shot Vail took

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at me had knocked a chunk from the outside of my thigh. It wasn't a sensational wound, but it had bled quite a lot.

It started hurting like hell as I looked at it, so I stopped looking at it.

I wasn't going to lose the leg—no more of it than I'd already lost—but I was sure going to have to wash it off, and put lots of iodine on it.

"Shell, where are your trousers?"

"Misty, don't ask so damn—you really should rest your throat, dear."

Then I looked at Ormand Monaco, feeling a little heat rising in me. "Well, friend," I said in what was not my most amiable voice, "didn't you notice me bleeding to death? Didn't it occur to you that perhaps some amateur surgeon had bungled the amputation of my leg? Was it not worth mentioning that my life's blood was dripping, dripping—"

"Why, I thought," he said soberly, "that Mr. Harper must have bitten your leg. While you were gouging out his eyes. And tearing his nose off—"

"You're a scream. Okay. There seems very little more joy I can scatter here. The hell with it. Give me my C-note and I shall remove myself from your splendid presence."

"C-note?"

"Perhaps I should explain for you cultured chaps that a C-note is gutter argot for a hundred fish, ten sawbucks—my hundred dollars, which believe it or not I have earned."

"You have earned ten G's, Mr. Scott," he said quietly.

"G's? Where did you learn—" I stopped. "Hold it. Thanks, but no thanks. I made a deal with you, remember? The whole ball of wax by noon, and ten G's. If not by then, a C-note a day. And the hundred fish," I added grimly, "should just about cover the expense of my transfusions, but I assured you I'd tap you only if there were unusual expenses."

"I made the deal, Mr. Scott. You merely agreed to it. And I assure you, sir, had you concluded this—this—this madness one second after the hour of twelve I would die. I would *die* before I would pay you one nickel more than a hundred dollars. But since you did successfully conclude the requirements for earning the ten thousand dollars, that is precisely what I intend to pay you."

"You off your nut?" I said. I looked at my watch. "It is now sixteen minutes after noon. If my clock hasn't stopped. No, the little beggar's still tick—"

"Of course it is now well after noon. You have been standing there, in your shorts, bleeding like an oaf, for at least a quarter of an hour."

"Watch this oaf business, old

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buddy. And I shall kindly ask you to leave my shorts out of this—"

Monaco went on, his tone heavy and sharp-edged, like the chopper descending in a guillotine, "When you stated that you had . . . pierced Mr. Vail with the scimitar, and that he was the guilty person, that he had killed Ephrim and the

He said, "It is twelve-seventeen and . . . ten seconds, now."

"You're four seconds slow. But we won't quibble about—"

From the doorway, a word. One word, which I had heard delivered in the same voice but not quite with the same resonance, earlier today in the lobby of the hotel.

In the Next Issue—A Story You'll Hardly Forget

HARD ROCK RUMBLE

A SHELL SCOTT Short Novel Classic

by RICHARD S. PRATHER

"A shadow came out of the blackness between me and the girl. It was about ten feet tall and half as wide. Its hand was reaching for me. I knew that shadow—intimately and too well. It was the shape of Murder." You'll thrill to this breathtaking climax of next month's big Shell Scott caper of danger, girls and sudden death. Reserve your copy now!

---

girl as well. I—unfortunately—looked at my watch. It was then just twenty seconds of noon."

"Twenty seconds? Of?"

"To be precise, twenty-one seconds. Since that is the truth, the tragic truth, I must in honesty pay you the agreed sum of ten thousand dollars."

"Glory be," I said. "Let's check our watches."

I looked around at Sergeant Torgesen filling the doorway; and, filling his broad face, the expression of a man with both legs caught in a bear trap.

I grinned at him, but there was no opportunity for jolly conversation with the sergeant because I heard Monaco saying, in words as dry and cold as frozen carbon dioxide, "I do not have time at the

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moment, Mr. Harper, but be assured I shall have much to say to you very soon."

Harper? Bull Harper? Ye Gods, was he still hanging around here? I had assumed he'd be a dwindling dot on the horizon by now. But—still here?

"Misty," I cried. "Shut your eyes! Turn away. Don't look—get away, run, run—"

But Monaco was continuing, those icy tones cutting through my babble. "I am delighted," he said, "simply delighted, to see that you have descended so far into stultifying convention that you are once again wearing trousers. I can think of nothing, out of literally millions of possibilities, for which at the moment I could possibly be more grateful. I congratulate you, Mr. Harper, on your hindsight. I extend to you in all sincerity the fervent thanks of the management, the staff, and notable celebrities and guests—of the *Kubla* . . ."

He couldn't go on. Ormand Monaco reached up and patted his face rapidly from both sides with his hands, in what I supposed was a nervous gesture. He was pulling on his cheeks now, getting them out pretty far and then letting them snap in.

Bull was, in fact, wearing my keen trousers. They didn't look so keen to me any more. I walked over to him.

"Well, you're a real idiot," I said cheerfully.

He grinned. Now that I took a good look at him, it was clear he must be quite a handsome man when he wasn't all beat up. "Your damn pants are too tight," he rumbled.

"The pants are perfect. You're just too damn big."

He grinned again. His teeth were all red. I'd got a lip or two of his pretty good, too. Boy, my head was beginning to hurt like fury. And my leg was already starting to feel shorter than the other one. And there were great throbbing places just about every place there was a place.

"Okay. Truce. But we gonna have a talk pretty damn quick," he said grimly.

"Bull, I'll talk to you any old time."

He looked at Ormand Monaco, the other people in the room, then strode out. I walked to the door. He strode along, almost bounced along, with a springy step. On his way back, I presumed, to room 218.

I turned and went back by Misty. She looked better. There was color in her lovely face and her eyes once more were sprinkled with magic.

She even managed a slow, sweet smile when I asked, "How are you, Misty? You feeling any better?"

"Oh, I'm fine, Shell. I really am, now."

And then—so was I.

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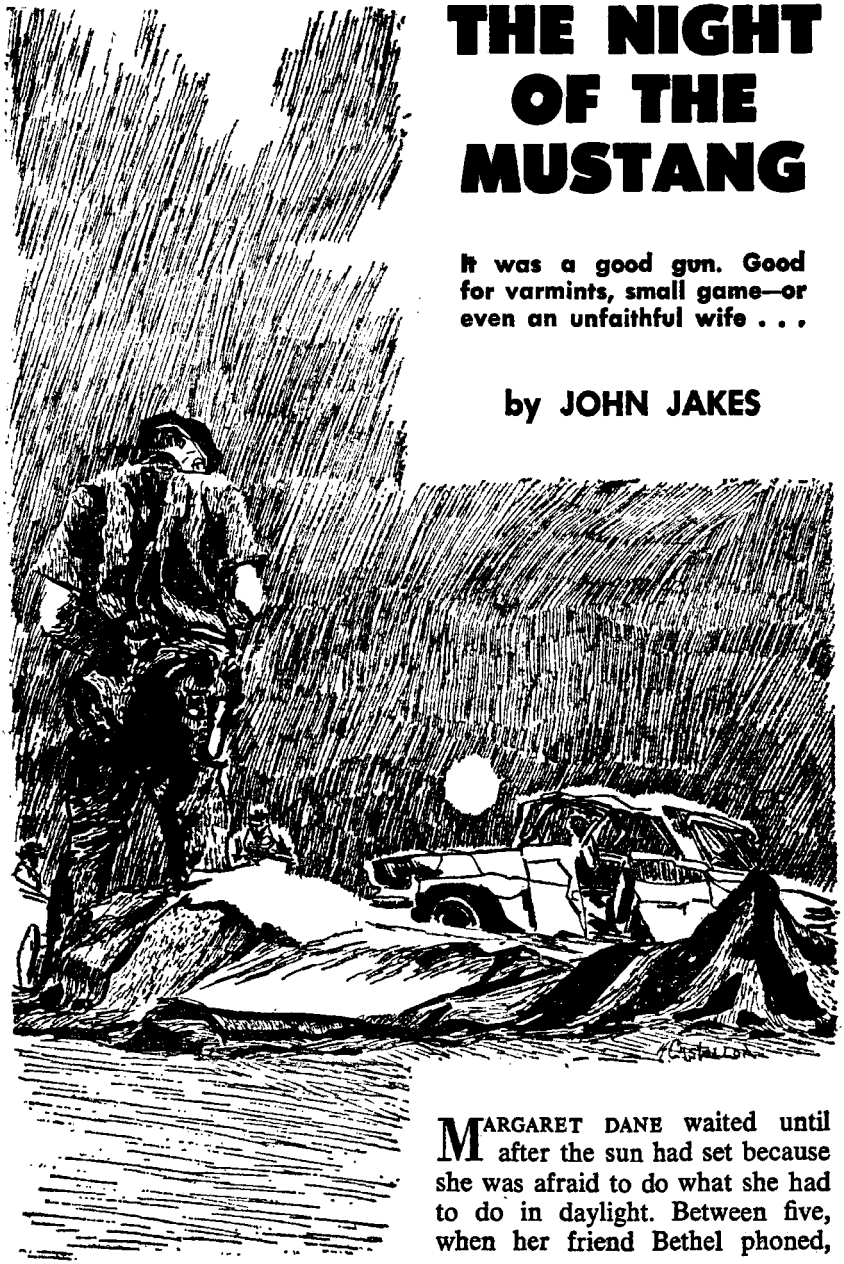
THE NIGHT OF THE MUSTANG

It was a good gun. Good for varmints, small game—or even an unfaithful wife . . .

by JOHN JAKES



MARGARET DANE waited until after the sun had set because she was afraid to do what she had to do in daylight. Between five, when her friend Bethel phoned,

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and seven, when the evening came on, she must have lifted the fiberglass draperies and glanced out the picture window fifty times.

There was the same street, Parkevale Crescent. The same children, playing kick ball or riding their tricycles. The same expensive, split level cookie-cutter homes ranged up and down the treeless, bulldozed slopes, each home with its television antenna pointed in the same direction, toward the city.

Margaret hid in the shadows and watched the sun set, waiting, afraid.

"I'm not a cookie-cutter woman," she had said to Chad, the first time.

But now Parkevale Crescent looked painfully comforting. The children looked so carefree. She had to leave it all. Quickly.

Len had found out.

How, she didn't know. Though she and Chad had been extremely careful when they met, it was obvious that they'd been seen. So Len knew. But that was not the worst. Not the worst by far.

Len had a gun.

Though she wore elegant, expensive fawn-gray slacks and patterned blouse, and had her usual high, frothy hairdo, the real Margaret Dane showed through the veneer. There was gray strain on her face as she let the drapes fall back in place one last time.

Now, she thought as she padded across the thick ivory carpeting. Now, the dark is here—*run.*

She left the house by the breezeway door. The latch made a tiny, final click that shut out the sound of the central air conditioning. She climbed into the shiny red Mustang in the double garage and backed out fast.

She felt the power straining under her right foot as she drove through the winding streets of the housing development. She watched carefully ahead, and to the right and left at intersections. She was conscious of her palms, damp on the wheel.

At last the patterned ugliness of the development faded behind. A couple of miles, no more, to the tollway access road.

She hit the Mustang's accelerator with a jerk of her foot. The car shot ahead, carrying her almost without volition, just as her affair with Chad had carried her to this point where she'd realized after Bethel's phone call that her husband Len knew.

And meant to kill her.

Why else would he pretend to drive away cheerfully at six that morning, to attend the preview presentation of next year's models at the auto company's traveling dealer show in a city seventy-five miles away? And why else would he come back unannounced to Harkins' sporting goods shop late in the afternoon to buy a shotgun?

A shotgun. God, what shabby

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melodrama! She felt like weeping. But she was thirty-seven years old. Ostensibly she'd known all along what she was doing.

Or had she? Len had become a stranger these past couple of years. They had no children to bind them together. Len frequently gave her long, morose glances at the dinner table. She could no longer tell what he was thinking.

That is, until now. Now she knew.

He was thinking *two-timer—I'll kill her.*

Margaret grew more frightened, more confused as the Mustang sang along the road in the darkening twilight. She had never been caught like this before. She'd never even had an affair with another man before. Now she was paying for it.

She had a small bag packed in the Mustang's trunk. The small red car was her escape mechanism, the red car bulleting along beneath the black crisscrosses of the elms that shaded the county highway in this last, dusky hour before total dark. *Run run run* was all she could think in her guilt and confusion.

A green sign dotted with sparklers blazed up on the shoulder ahead: TOLLWAY ENTRANCE 1 MILE.

The wind snapped the Mustang's convertible top, sang through the slight opening where the window was rolled down on her side. The landscape grew a sinister orange as the sun sank. She heard the voice of her friend Bethel Johnson. Bethel was divorced and worked as a teller at the Third National Bank. Bethel's remembered voice seemed to crackle and echo on the wind as Margaret hammered the Mustang ahead:

"—I'm sure, Maggie. Ordinarily I leave by the front door at five. But tonight I had to cut across to the market. Mr. Bayless let me out the back way. Len's car—one of them, anyway—was parked behind Harkins'."

"Len had a metallic blue sedan last night and this morning."

"That was the color. And it had the regular LD-1 dealer plate."

"Bethel, couldn't it have been someone else driving the car?" Margaret had said, her stomach tight and hurting.

"Honey, I tell you I saw him walk out of Harkins' just as I went into the market. He was acting—well, furtive, I guess, is the best word."

Bethel Johnson knew about Chad. Margaret had had to tell someone. Margaret said into the phone:

"About the package. You just said —"

"I saw the barrels sticking out of the paper."

"A shotgun."

"Maggie, I don't know what to say. Maybe there's a reason—"

"Sure."

"No, I mean—besides—"

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"Yes," Margaret had said. "There's a reason why he came back secretly when he was supposed to stay at the dealer show overnight. There's a reason." Before Bethel could say anything besides a brief, meaningless phrase of confused commiseration, Margaret had hung up. She'd known then that she had to run or Len would kill her.

Len had never been a violent man.

But how did you know a man wasn't violent until you'd given him cause for violence? Then, perhaps, was when you learned—

Ahead, Margaret saw the spiralling upward curve of white concrete heading into the faint orange light of the west: The tollway entrance. The Mustang shot forward, almost with too much power.

She'd been a little afraid of the car when Len first brought it home. It responded so easily, so effortlessly. Driving it was like being carried aboard a wheeled rocket. She began to correct the steering, realizing she was going a little too fast for the turn.

The Mustang's rear end began to drift as she headed into the right turn up the access ramp doing forty-five. That was twenty miles above the posted safe speed. The Mustang's back end drifted faster toward the left. The access ramp was a rising corkscrew ribbon, and she could not control the wheel quickly enough.

She hit the brake in panic. The tires yelped. The Mustang shuddered to a halt, sitting obliquely across both lanes.

Margaret leaned on the steering wheel. She was breathing hard. A horn blared. Lights blazed. She looked up, gasped.

She slammed her foot onto the accelerator. The Mustang lunged ahead. A panel truck coming down the exit side of the ramp shaved past the Mustang, horn blaring and fading.

"Get hold of yourself," Margaret said loud. But she was shaking. She'd never escape to anywhere alive if she didn't calm down.

But a shotgun wasn't something Len ever used, or kept in the house. He was no hunter. *Except now.*

Margaret guided the fast little red car up toward the toll booths.

The area around the toll booths had a pale graveyard brilliance. Tall mercury lights blazed down. Margaret was afraid of the light. The Mustang crawled forward. This was idiotic. Where was she going? Where would she stop? What she needed was protection.

She jerked the wheel over.

The tires crunched on shoulder gravel. She killed the motor abruptly, pulling up at a public phone booth just before the toll arches.

She climbed unsteadily out of the car, walked toward the booth. She fumbled change from her

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purse. This was Chad's responsibility. He had to help her. She noticed one of the toll booth guards watching her through the glass.

She stumbled into the booth. She was violating her agreement with Chad, but she needed Chad now. He would be home for dinner. He'd have to listen to her. She fed in the change and dialled the number she had promised never to call.

There were several long, lonely buzzings. Margaret breathed loudly. *Answer.*

A click. Then a strange, reedy girl voice: "Carpenter residence."

Who was it? Chad's daughter? The voice was too old.

"This—this is an emergency. I must speak with Mr. Carpenter."

"Well, this is the baby sitter. Mr. and Mrs. Carpenter aren't home."

Margaret closed her eyes, shuddering. "Where are they?"

"At the country club. I have the number if you want it."

"Yes, please. I don't have a phone book right here." There was one on the chain below the booth counter, but Margaret knew she could never find the number herself. She was shaking too badly.

"This isn't Mrs. Blenkman, is it?" said the baby sitter abruptly.

"Mrs. who?"

"Blenkman. Mr. Carpenter left a message for Mrs. Blenkman, she's some lady who has an insurance policy with Mr. Carpenter's agency. Mr. Carpenter said I should tell her he'd call her tomorrow, because it looks like the claim is all right. That's what I have written down. Are you Mrs. Blenkman?"

Margaret wished she were. Anyone, anyone else.

"No, no I'm not. Give me the club number, please. Hurry."

The baby sitter gave her the number. Margaret hung up and fumbled in her purse for another dime. She nearly dropped it getting it in the slot.

She dialled the club. She was connected with a bartender. She recognized his voice; it was Frank, who knew her. She tried to make her own voice deeper. In the background, dance band music and hoarse laughter blurred Frank's reply to her question.

"What was it?" she said. "I couldn't hear—"

"Lady, he was here, but I don't see him right now. Too many people—"

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"This is an emergency. You've got find him."

"Lady, are you drunk?"

"No, no—" Margaret wiped tears from her face. She tried to breathe in the stifling booth. "Please find Mr. Carpenter. Get him to the phone." Then she grew shrill: "I'm telling you that you have to find him—"

"With all these people yelling for drinks I don't have to find nobody for no drunken broad," the bartender said.

"Wait!" Margaret cried, "wait! I'm sorry. Don't hang up; I must speak—"

The dance music, the laughter, the other world bright and far away died in the click out of the black mouthpiece.

Slowly Margaret hung up and walked out of the booth.

The night arched full black now, high over the blue-washed island of the toll plaza. She leaned against the side of the red Mustang. In her head she heard echoes of the dance music from the club. She was alone.

All alone, and it was full dark, and Len had a shotgun.

The panic began to make her tremble harder. She got in and started the Mustang. She had difficulty controlling it. The bumper nearly smashed the wall of the toll booth as she pulled up under the arch and braked too hard. Ahead, past the arch, she saw the six great lanes of the tollway with anonymous pairs of headlights flashing east and west.

The guard who had watched her before extended the punched ticket.

With a start Margaret realized her window was not rolled down. Her hand shook as she operated the button. The guard passed the ticket into her hand. She hit the accelerator.

The Mustang leaped forward with frightening power.

Again a corkscrew ramp, this time downward. In a moment she was on the three-lane westbound span, her expensive, soft leather slipper bearing down on the accelerator.

The illuminated speed needle on the dash climbed to seventy and kept going upward. When it reached eighty-five, she eased off. She was easily passing most of the traffic.

But she wasn't driving well. She tended to veer thoughtlessly. Several times horns blared in anger. Ahead the night opened black and heavy.

How far should she drive? Where should she stop? How should she begin? Change her name?

She knew nothing about this sort of thing. She only knew that she was cut off, alone, and she wanted to live.

Clear thought was difficult. Somehow, what she was doing was wrong. Yet running had seemed

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the only right course after Bethel called.

A tiny part of her mind knew that she had let panic catch her. Yet the tiny part of her mind had no control over the great driving guilt and fear in her that linked her whole body to the Mustang now, both of them leaping ahead into the far black night.

The Mustant teetered on the edge of control. She was driving too fast. But she couldn't help that, not with Len having bought a shotgun—

Another huge green sparkling sign that seemed to float in the dark above the roadway indicated that she had reached the first exit past the point where she'd entered. She relaxed a little. The first exit was Murphytown, a good two dozen miles from home.

She might make it.

Just a hundred miles or so and it should be safe for her to find a motel. She'd take some of the sleeping pills in her bag. Tomorrow she'd think what she must do. She couldn't think about it now. Escape was the first thing she must keep on—

A pair of headlights lit up the Mustang's rear mirror.

Margaret realized the lights had been steady behind her for some seconds. But she had only become aware of them just now. She bore down on the accelerator. The Mustang leaped ahead. The needle climbed past eighty-five.

The lights behind blazed bigger. Suddenly they swung to the left. The car meant to pass. Margaret swallowed. The Mustang felt edgy under her hands, difficult to control.

The big lights coming up on the outside glared with ominous brightness. She turned her head a bit to the left, cried out softly.

Edging up past her window was the hood of a Ford sedan, pale gunmetal blue, a current model. She kicked down hard on the accelerator. The Mustang picked up another five miles an hour.

But the Ford kept edging steadily up alongside. She could not see its windshield, only its hood so far.

Len, Len, she thought in the wild noise of engine and wind and her own hammering heart.

Len Dane Your Friendly Dealer! said the big neon sign above the showroom. Len drove a different sedan or convertible demonstrator home most every night. They all had LD-1 dealer plates—

She knew it was Len in the sedan pulling parallel. Somehow he'd caught up with her—

In the night ahead the tollway took a big, bending turn to the left. Margaret was breathing through clenched teeth, dimly aware of the curve racing toward her. The Mustang's speed needle trembled above ninety. The sedan was still trying to edge up beside her. Someone inside the sedan was making a violent motion. She was aware of

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flashing into the turn too fast, of feeling the wheel slip in her perspiring hands.

The right front tire hit the gravel of the right shoulder because she had not corrected fast enough. The whole front end wrenched.

She tried to correct but the car had gotten away from her, rocketing straight ahead, not turning. A white guard rail loomed, rushed at her in the glare of her own headlights. She cried out, "Len, don't kill me!" and the windshield glass broke inward upon her in a thousand cruel stars.

SHE WAS AWARE of a smell of gasoline, of hot oil, of grass beneath her. She hurt more than she had ever hurt in her life. She heard voices. Two heavy male shadows fell across headlights. One voice came through with some clarity:

"She'll never make it."

Another: "Where's the ambulance?"

The first: "On the way."

I can hear you, Margaret said. But no words came from her throat as she lay stiff and full of pain. A siren rose in the night. She turned her head a little. The effort cost her terrible pain. With a cold little certainty, she knew she was paralyzed and dying.

Flames crackled somewhere. The Mustang was burning. She had turned her head enough so that she could see four black boots, and beyond them a Ford sedan, an unmarked highway patrol car. The siren rose. On the other side of the parked police Ford, headlights shunted ahead westward into the black night, hurrying on.

Len had killed her. Hadn't he? Had she killed herself? Not tonight. Long ago. With Chad. With wanting to escape, using Chad, that first time. Wanting to escape from what had seemed a ghastly life of—*she hurt.*

The voices again. Tollgate police, she knew dully.

"You sure this was the same car?"

"I saw the plate good and clear."

"They wanted to find the guy's wife?"

"Yeah, neighbors saw the car drive out around seven. Then somebody discovered this guy Dane someplace, so they wanted to track down the wife to notify her, I guess. That's why they put it on the radio."

"How'd he kill himself?"

"With a shotgun. In his car out in the country."

"Why?"

"Who knows?"

The flames crackled. Margaret Dane cried, knowing they couldn't hear her, as she couldn't clearly hear the approaching siren whose sound slowly dwindled in her mind until, as she was on the brink of a little tortured laugh, all sound stopped, forever.

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He was little and trapped and plenty scared, and there was no way out. There was one last thing he could do . . .

Once Over Lightly

by NORMAN HUNT

BERNARD BRAINERD BARKER *is hereby cited this day by the Police Department for conspicuous bravery . . .*

The Friendly Drugstore, which took up an entire building just off Holwell Street, sold books, magazines, greeting cards, hardware and typewriters, among many other items. On his first day as a stock boy a frightened and insecure Barney Barker was put to work refilling the baby food display.

He was carrying a six-dozen carton in his thin young hands when he suddenly felt sweat turning into a sort of butter-coated grease across his palms.

"I'm sorry," he said in advance to an attractive salesgirl standing nearby. "I'm really terribly sor—oh, oh!"

After the crash he stared at the blotches staining the girl's well-shaped legs and said, "Let me wipe those stains off—I mean—I didn't mean—oh hell!"

. . . In a difficult situation, Bernard Brainerd Barker never flinched, never hesitated . . .

He hurriedly carried the moist carton into one of the back rooms and opened it and pulled out the half dozen baby food jars which had been smashed. Suddenly he called out with pain because he'd just cut a palm.

One of the pharmacists overheard him and grinned. "You don't have to work for a living, kid; you

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could always rob the store today, instead."

"Mr. Welsch, I couldn't get up nerve enough to ask which way the men's room is. I wish I had more —well, guts."

"The week-end receipts are still here," Dave Welsch said, not having heard him. "The boss makes a bank deposit himself at exactly half-past two every Mond—"

Dave Welsch suddenly snapped his fingers, and told Barney to follow him. Barney followed nervously to the boss' office. They found Joshua Quint busily nudging a fly off his nose.

Mr. Quint was a small, gentle fellow with pink baby skin and a permanent frown.

"I'm sure you shouldn't keep to such an exact schedule of bank deposits, sir," Dave Welsch said. "At the very least, you ought to leave for the bank a little earlier or later, sir."

"Perhaps so, Dan—uh, Dave," Mr. Quint said thoughtfully.

"I was thinking that for today, sir, you might go to the bank at the same time as usual, and that Barney here—the new stock boy, you know—could really carry the money a little later on. Nobody'd guess he had it."

"Not a bad idea at all," Mr. Quint said warmly, over Barney's gasp of fright. "You're bonded, Barney, aren't you?"

Barney nodded slowly. His teeth chattered.

. . . acting with extraordinary heroism . . .

Barney left the store not long afterwards, a liver-colored portfolio held tightly in both sweaty hands and close to his chest. Inside it were the week-end receipts.

If he had known that Mr. Quint, the decoy, had been forced to tell a mugger the truth about who was carrying the money and what the messenger looked like, Barney would certainly have been even more frightened.

But perhaps he couldn't have been more frightened.

Shakily he walked into the alley that was a shortcut to the bank. His right foot suddenly squashed a broken bottle. In shocked pain he let the portfolio drop out of his hands. On the next move towards it he promptly kicked a garbage can and nearly lost his balance.

Dimly he saw a man running in his direction. The man's right arm rose, and Barney's head connected at one side with a blackjack. But he didn't fall; he reached out both hands toward the mugger's midriff and held on with frenzied persistence. When he fell up against the dirty gray brick wall, he pulled the exasperated mugger with him.

And all the time it was happening, Barney shouted in spite of the pain and in spite of everything else.

. . . Bernard Brainerd Barker is hereby cited by the Police Department for conspicuous bravery in capturing and refusing to let go

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of a dangerous criminal till a uniformed officer arrived on the scene.

"I don't believe that you suddenly turned into Richard the Lion-Hearted," Dave Welsch said, after Barney had been given the citation and been promoted by Mr. Quint to a clerk's job. "What really happened?"

"We-el, my back was against the wall and I couldn't move in any direction." Barney admitted. "I wasn't holding on to the mugger so he'd be caught. I was just trying to keep from falling down like a log."

"And for that you're a hero," Dave Welsch said. "At least you had nerve enough to accept an award for something you didn't do."

"It's easier than telling the truth," Barney said. "I'd be a lot too scared to do that."

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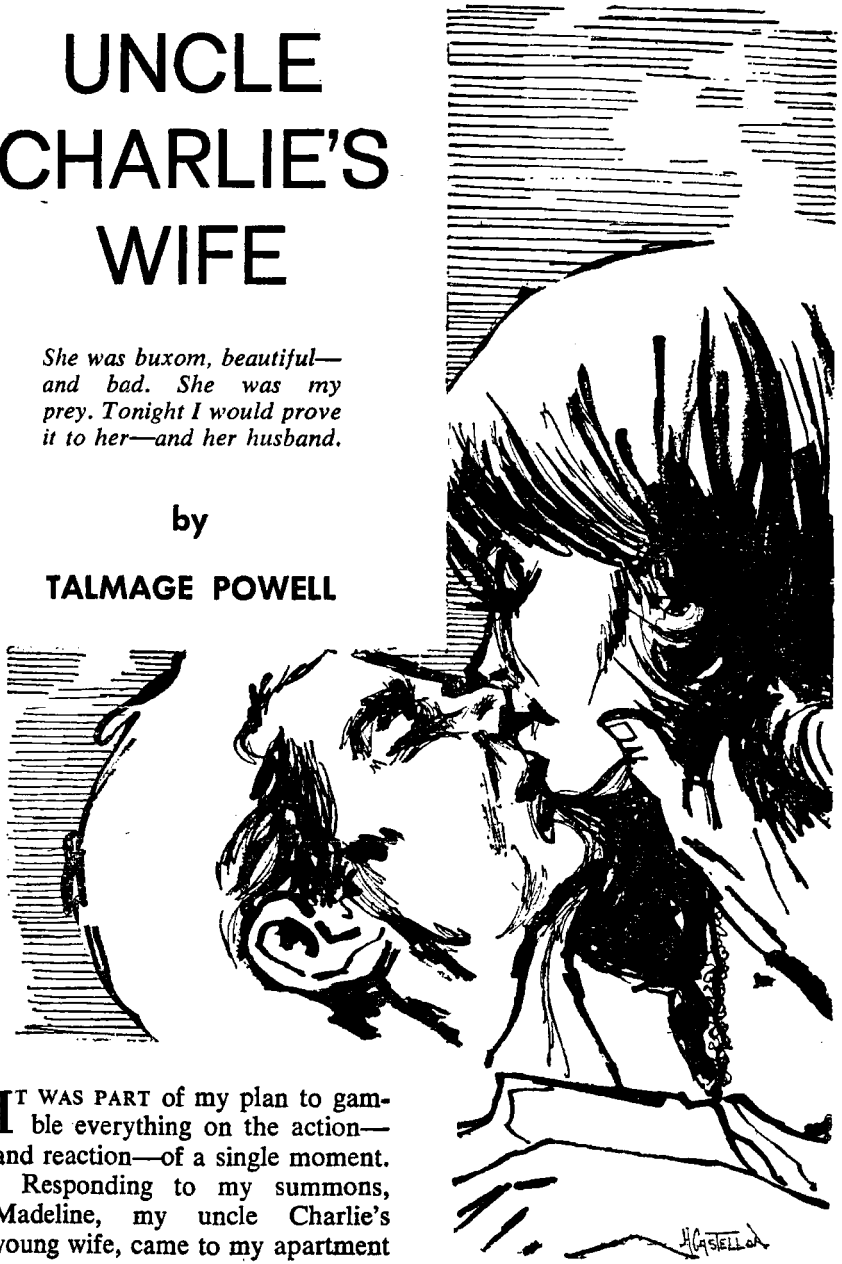
UNCLE CHARLIE'S WIFE

She was buxom, beautiful—and bad. She was my prey. Tonight I would prove it to her—and her husband.

by

TALMAGE POWELL



IT WAS PART of my plan to gamble everything on the action—and reaction—of a single moment.

Responding to my summons, Madeline, my uncle Charlie's young wife, came to my apartment

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alone. I greeted her cheerily and stepped behind her to lift the mink stole from her slender shoulders.

With her blonde hair piled atop her head, her neck was slim and inviting. I kissed her warmly on the nape, my hands tensile and strong on her shoulders, the mink sliding to the carpet.

I felt her stiffen slightly. "Freddy, really!" A faint shiver of pleasure coursed through her. Then she pulled herself from my grip and turned to face me, attempting to bring a spark of outrage to her wide blue eyes. "What's come over you, Freddy?"

"This," I said. I pulled her close to me and kissed her on the lips. My plan, I might say, was proving to have its pleasurable aspects.

When I released her, her face was warmed with color. She tried to portray shock, but her slap across my cheek was half-hearted.

"Let me out of here this instant, Freddy!"

I smiled, lighted a cigarette, offered it to her lips, and lighted a second for myself.

I was really making no move to stop her, but she didn't leave.

Instead, she said, "Are you drunk, Freddy?"

"Delightfully," I said. "Drunk, soaring, reeling from the sight of you, the perfume you wear, the touch of your lips."

"You mustn't say such things. I believe you're crazy!"

"Driven to distraction," I said, "by the thought of you. From the moment I met you, Maddy, the day he brought you to his home, a surprise bride, I've been able to think of nothing else."

"And your phone call, asking me here to discuss a matter of business, was just a hoax?"

"I had to see you, darling. I couldn't—"

With adoration in my young and handsome (I speak modestly) face, I drew her to me and kissed her again. She made feeble struggles as a show of propriety. Then she was limp and unresisting against me. And then her arms stole about my neck and the kiss was being returned, with feeling.

Embracing her, I was briefly tempted to throw out my plan and devise a substitute.

She was breathing quickly when we emerged for air.

She took a deeper breath, held it. As she disengaged herself, she managed, "For the sake of family harmony, I'll not mention this to Charlie. But it mustn't happen again, Freddy."

"All right, Maddy," I said in a broken, miserable tone. "I'll struggle with myself as best as I can. And I'll try not to think of the cruel wasting away of your youth and loveliness, shut up in that dreary house with a dull, boring, old man. The nights are so long and empty —but maybe we can manage somehow."

Biting her lips, she fled toward

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my apartment door, as if it were now or never.

"Wait," I said. "You're forgetting this—"

I scooped the mink stole from the carpet, crossed to her, and put the wrap about her shoulders. Then the stole slithered to the floor again as my arms remained about her.

Each kiss was becoming more interesting. This time, when we murmured with our faces close together there was no more talk of Charlie.

"You've only seen me in *his* house, his presence," I said. "But the discovery of the real me, I promise you, will be exciting."

"I've been deprived of excitement for so long, Freddy, I'll probably die of it."

"That sounds as if a tall, cool drink is in order," I suggested.

My apartment was small, but tastefully maintained even on my earnings as a not-too-successful real estate salesman. While I mixed the drinks, Madeline explored, looking over the comfortable furnishings, the heavy window draperies, the books and prints of good paintings. I clicked a switch behind the bar and my stereo tape recorder went into action, filling the room with the soft sound of good music.

The music seemed to come from somewhere, out of the softly lighted air itself.

Madeline tilted her head and studied me as I carried her drink to her.

"Like the music?"

"Very much," she said.

"I glommed it off an FM radio broadcast. I've got miles of tapes. I'm a bug on tape recording, fortunately, since I don't have the money to buy the albums I'd like."

"You're not at all like your uncle Charlie, Freddy."

"And aren't we glad of that?" I suggested.

Later, in a crowded nightspot, we danced until we were boneweary. I was able to show her a couple of the very latest dances.

"I used to know them all," she said as we returned to our table. "But married to Charlie—his idea of real boss music is Lawrence Welk playing a foxtrot."

"Charlie?" I said. "Who is Charlie?"

She squeezed my hand and laughed. "You're so right, Freddy. For tonight, at least, there is no old man named Charlie!"

Our next stop was a dim spot which featured a cool jazz trio, vibes, bass, and piano. The drinks were good, the late snack tasty.

"He'll only be gone a week, Freddy," she said, a pensive moment coming to her. "Just a week, while he sees that specialist in New York about his arthritis. Then that tomb of a house, that—that nothingness."

I took her hand, raised it to my lips, and kissed each fingertip.

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"Don't think beyond a week," I said. "Think of now."

She looked about her, was in her element, and she thought of now.

"I didn't know how—how starved I was, Freddy."

"I did," I said. "I suspected, at first. Then I knew."

"What'll we do tomorrow, Freddy?"

"How about some water ski-ing in the afternoon, after breakfast, as a starter?"

"You, Freddy? On water skis? Well, of course! It's perfect for this Freddy I'm beginning to glimpse. But wouldn't water ski-ing be a bit public? After all, if Charlie finds out—"

"Who is Charlie?" I reminded. "Anyway, I have a friend up at the lake who has a boat. No one up there knows either of us."

We glided over the water. We returned to the city, had a dinner, saw a racy show at a nightclub, returned to my apartment for a nightcap.

There were no hors d'oeuvres with the drinks, just kisses.

As we nestled together on the couch, she sighed softly. "If only Charlie wasn't coming back in a week—"

"Or a month," I said.

In the silence, a late night rain began beating against the apartment windows. It made the room even warmer and cosier.

"Or ever," I said.

She stirred slightly. "What, Freddy? What was that you said?"

"I said, wouldn't it be nice if Charlie were gone forever?"

"Freddy, you mustn't say such a thing!"

"Why not? You're thinking the same thing."

"No I'm not," she said. "It's a dreadful thought." She pondered for a moment. Then, "But he *is* sick and old, isn't he, Freddy?"

"And ever so rich," I said.

"He suffers. The poor dear does suffer."

"But he might linger for years," I said. "Until we're standing on shore and watching the young people water ski."

"It really isn't fair, Freddy, that our youth should be wasted when we could be enjoying it."

"Oh, well," I said, "someday you'll be his widow. You'll have the money."

She raised slightly to look into my face. "You think I married him only for his money, Freddy?"

"Why else?"

"Well, perhaps I did. But I was keeping my part of the bargain. I was trying to make him happy. But his only happiness seems to be in practically keeping me under lock and key, watching me with those insanely jealous eyes. It's been—It hasn't turned out like I thought it would, Freddy. It's pretty horrible!"

She wept briefly, alcoholically, in self pity.

"We could always run away," I

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said. "But then he'd see to it that you never got a dime of his money. I'm afraid this delightful thing we've discovered would go quite sour in a cold water flat."

"Freddy, we're in such a mess!"

"Unless he should go away forever," I said.

"No, no. Don't talk about it. Just kiss me, Freddy."

I kissed her.

The thought lay dormant between us until the night before uncle Charlie's return. Maddy and I were in my apartment for our now-customary nightcaps when she voiced the looming fact: "Tomorrow he'll be home, Freddy."

"I know."

"It was tough enough before, Freddy, not at all like what I'd once thought it would be. But now —I simply can't stand the thought of that house and that possessive old man."

"I know," I said again.

"What you mentioned the other night, Freddy, about him being gone for good. It could be arranged. Old men do have accidents."

"We'll have to give it some thought," I said.

"A great deal of thought," she agreed. "We'll have to plan very carefully."

"Yes," I said, "I'm always in favor of the most careful planning."

Dutifully, I was on hand to greet uncle Charlie when he arrived at his home the next afternoon. I listened with keen attention as he told me of the medical treatment he'd received and how much better he was feeling.

Maddy lacked the acting ability with which I am generously endowed. She could not suppress entirely a slight shudder as the big-knuckled hands of the gaunt, gray old man reached to embrace her.

"Please, Uncle," I said, "let me have the pleasure of helping to celebrate your return home in better health. I sold a property just today and you simply must permit me a spendthrift moment on this happy day. I'm having a caterer serve a small dinner tonight in my apartment for the three of us."

Maddy gave me a puzzled look, but Uncle Charlie's old eyes misted. He patted my shoulder. "You really are a fine boy, Freddy. You can count on us being there."

Uncle Charlie stepped onto the

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stair lift that carried him to the second story of his old colonial home. As he disappeared into the upper hallway, trailed by a servant carrying his bags, Maddy gave me a fierce whisper: "What ever did you do that for?"

"The dinner? Why, darling, we're all going to be much closer from now on as a family. Then if you and I just happen to bump into each other at your country club—"

Her anger was replaced by a secretive smile. "Sure, Freddy, nobody would think much of it. You do think of all the angles."

"I try to. Until tonight, my sweet."

I was alone in my apartment when Uncle Charlie and Maddy arrived. I welcomed them, thrust drinks in their hands.

Uncle Charlie looked about. "Where's the caterer? I want food, not booze!"

"A drink to steady you, uncle Charlie, for a spot of pre-dinner entertainment." As I spoke the words, I was crossing the room.

I flicked a switch, and the recorder began its planned playback. Voices, mine and Maddy's, filled the room in stereo sound.

First there were spoken endearments, gusty exclamations of passion.

Violent rage began to suffuse Uncle Charlie's face as comprehension chased away his initial bewilderment. Maddy choked on her drink, dropped the glass to the carpet.

"Freddy!" she gasped. "Have you gone mad?"

She would have rushed to me, but uncle Charlie grabbed her wrist with those surprisingly strong, big-knuckled old hands.

"Frederick," he said in a sub-zero tone, "your explanation had better be good!"

I held up my hand for silence. "The tape will explain itself."

And from the tape came the disembodied voices:

". . . You think I married him only for his money, Freddy? Well —Perhaps I did—Just kiss me, Freddy . . ."

". . . Tomorrow he'll be home, Freddy . . ."

". . . I know . . ."

". . . I can't stand the thought of that house and that possessive old man . . ."

". . . I know . . ."

". . . Old men do have accidents, Freddy . . . It could be arranged . . . We'll have to plan very carefully . . ."

There was more, much more, since I'd recorded every word that had passed between Maddy and me in this apartment and then spliced the tape to my satisfaction.

But Uncle Charlie needed no more. With a sound of rage that would have done credit to a scarred old grizzly, he turned on his young, treacherous wife.

I was prepared for his action

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and sprang instantly. I grabbed him before he could get his hands on her throat.

"No!" I yelled. "Don't be a fool! Is she worth the trouble you'll cause yourself?"

I wrestled him back. Maddy complicated things by letting out a sudden screech and lunging at me with the intention of separating my eyes from their sockets.

"You dirty louse!" she screamed. "You tricked me!"

I ducked her clawing fingernails, caught her wrists. She struck the door with her back, slightly dishevelled, vulgar and cheap.

"Listen, Charlie," she said desperately, "I can explain things. If you'll—"

"Get out," Uncle Charlie said in a choked voice. "Get out while you have a chance!"

"Charlie—" she wailed.

"My lawyers will take immediate action," Uncle Charlie said. "You've had it, you dirty little chippy. The divorce will be quick. You'll never get a damn dime!"

Maddy looked from one to the other of us. She recognized the finality of her defeat.

She tried to kill me with one final look. Then a sob ripped through her. She opened the door and staggered out.

The apartment was very quiet. I put my arm about Uncle Charlie's shoulders.

"I'm sorry, Uncle Charlie. Very sorry."

"I ought to hate you, Freddy."

"But you don't. Because you can see that it was the only way. It didn't take me long to see through her."

He sighed heavily. "Just an old fool—with the wool over his eyes."

I helped him to the couch.

"Don't berate yourself. It's over now. You must go about the business of forgetting her."

"Yes," he said with a slow breath, "you're right, of course."

"How about that drink now, Uncle Charlie?"

"Yes—I need it." His eyes followed me. I gave him a smile as I dropped ice in a glass.

"You're all I have now Freddy," he said. "Just like before. All I have. Lucky for me you're such a good boy."

I chunked him lightly on the shoulder as I handed him the drink. I mixed a drink for myself, and we raised our glasses.

The room was warmed with the feeling of comradeship. He had no way of knowing that I was toasting the day in the near future when an unfortunate accident would be arranged for him.

When the divorce was final, when Maddy's removal was complete, Uncle Charlie's time would be up.

I'd waited for Uncle Charlie's money a long time. I certainly didn't intend to risk the shock and danger again of another such as Maddy.

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OLD MAN WITH A GUN

"I'm going to fix you, Mr. Jalna. And I don't care if I go to jail for it. It'll be well worth it. You'll be dead."

by C. B. GILFORD

MR. JALNA was nervous. He was nervous almost every night about this time. Between eleven-thirty and one. That was the dangerous time.

He didn't know why he stayed in this business. He had to make a living, but there must be other ways. There was no big money in running a liquor store, at least not where he was—on the highway, on the edge of town. A lonely spot. Mostly what there was in this business was danger.

Which was why Mr. Jalna kept a gun on the shelf under the counter, just to the right of the cash register. A small revolver, well oiled and cared for, lethal at close range. In the nineteen months since he'd bought this store, he'd had to use the weapon twice.

Once he'd waved it menacingly, and the would-be robber had retreated. The second occasion had been a real gun battle. He had been shot at. But he'd ducked behind the counter, grabbed the revolver, and returned the fire. The bandit had counted on some easy cash, not on a siege. He'd fled too.

So Mr. Jalna had had good luck, in a way. Or maybe the word had gone around in small-time

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hoodlum circles that this particular liquor store was no pushover. There hadn't been a robbery attempt in more than a year now.

But he was nervous anyway. Even though he'd use one in defense of his property, he didn't like guns. And he didn't like violence. But what he hated most was that there seemed to be so many people in this world who didn't believe in working, who thought instead that they could walk into a place and take a man's money away from him.

Mr. Jalna hadn't lost any money that way yet, and he didn't intend to. Mr. Jalna was old-fashioned.

It was just past midnight when the noisy sedan stopped in front. Mr. Jalna peered at the car through his plate-glass window, noting details. He'd become accustomed to this—he never knew when he might have to describe a car later to the police. This was a dusty black Plymouth, ten years old. It wasn't a souped-up job, just needed a muffler.

A bunch of punk kids who would try to convince him they were old enough to buy whiskey. Mr. Jalna didn't believe in selling to minors, not merely because he was afraid of losing his license, but on principle. Kids couldn't handle alcohol. In fact, nobody could. Mr. Jalna didn't like liquor himself.

The right rear door of the Plymouth opened, and a kid in a bright sport shirt climbed out. He hesitated, said something to somebody in the car, then swaggered into the store.

Mr. Jalna took stock of him as he entered. Probably not more than seventeen. Jeans and scuffed black boots. A sort of pimply face, but good features. Blue eyes with a slight squint, unruly blond hair.

Mr. Jalna made a quick diagnosis. Not a bad kid basically, but mixed-up. Had dropped out of school. No job. Where did he get the money for booze then? His father? No, the old man drank up all the family's spare cash himself. Odd jobs, maybe, or hubcaps.

"Gimme a pint of Barker's," the boy said, trying to sound sophisticated and confident.

"Barker's what?"

"Bourbon."

"How old are you, kid?"

"How old do you think I am?"

"You look about seventy-five, sonny, but show me your draft card or driver's license."

The blue eyes had been wandering about the store. Now they flicked to Mr. Jalna, hostile, condescending. Mr. Jalna looked straight back at him.

"You want to sell me something, Mac, or don't you?"

Mr. Jalna shook his head. "I don't."

The kid shrugged.

"Okay, I'll get it somewhere else," he said.

"You probably will."

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The kid turned and left. But he went slowly.

Mr. Jalna had a strange feeling. The conversation hadn't been quite right somehow. The boy hadn't really expected to be able to buy any liquor. The conversation had been a cover-up. He had been looking the place over, measuring everything. The store and the proprietor.

Mr. Jalna edged toward the cash register, toward the concealed shelf where the gun lay. His palms had begun to sweat. He'd been lucky for too long now.

The kid had gone back to the car. He was leaning on a window, talking to someone inside. Mr. Jalna couldn't see how many there were. But the kid had climbed out of the back seat, which meant there were more than three.

The conversation went on for a long time. Perhaps there was an argument. The boy started gesturing to his companions inside the car. He walked away once, as if he were going to leave them. Then he came back. The conversation went on. Then suddenly the car's engine roared, the tires dug gravel, and the black Plymouth sped away, leaving the boy standing there alone.

Mr. Jalna relaxed a bit, but he was puzzled too. What had the argument been about? What had this kid wanted to do, that his companions didn't want to do?

The boy hesitated a good three or four minutes before he came in. And before he came in he appeared to look up and down the highway—either watching for the return of the Plymouth or for something else. And he kept looking over his shoulder after he came in.

"You got a phone?" he asked.

"No public phone," Mr. Jalna answered.

"I'll pay you a dime," the kid said.

Mr. Jalna couldn't decide. He could tell the kid to hike down the road to a filling station. Or would that be a way to start something unpleasant? Let the kid use the phone. Get rid of him. But he didn't like letting the kid behind the counter.

"Go ahead, use it," Mr. Jalna said, nodding toward the instrument. But he stayed where he was, concealing the shelf and the gun with his fat body.

The kid came around the counter, picked up the receiver, and started dialing. He kept looking around, making a complete survey. Maybe he ought to be allowed to see the gun. If he was thinking of making trouble, that might scare him off. Mr. Jalna moved, but too late. The kid wasn't looking any more. He slammed down the receiver.

"Nobody home," he said, and added a curse.

It happened fast after that. Where the kid had the gun hidden, Mr. Jalna never knew. Maybe in his

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belt, with the bright shirt hanging over it. But it appeared swiftly in the boy's right hand, and its muzzle pointed toward Mr. Jalna. No words were necessary. The message was clear.

Mr. Jalna was fat; he wasn't agile, and he hadn't practiced quick draws. Maybe he wasn't even brave. But in his old-fashioned way he didn't like the idea of being robbed.

He dived toward the floor. As he went, his hand grabbed at the revolver on the shelf. He got hold of it, had to shift his grip before he could get his finger inside the trigger guard. He aimed and fired from a distance of twelve to fifteen feet.

The first bullet was on target, hit the boy low in the chest. But Mr. Jalna fired again. The second bullet went to the left and a bit higher than the first. The spread might not have been caused by Mr. Jalna's aim faltering. Perhaps it was because the body was already falling.

It was very still when the echoes of the shots had died away. Mr. Jalna got up slowly, replacing the revolver on its shelf. He was breathing hard. Now that it was all over, he was trembling.

The boy was dead. Mr. Jalna didn't have to look closer to determine that. The body had slipped down between the counter and the wall of shelves behind it, and now was wedged into the narrow walking space. Two thin trickles of blood had begun to emerge from underneath. The blood mingled with the spilled liquid from several bottles that had fallen and broken there on the floor. There was a strong smell of whiskey in the air. Mr. Jalna glanced at the labels. One of them, at least, was Barker's, the brand that the boy had said he wanted to buy.

He detoured around the counter toward the telephone, and even before he had the number dialed, he was already saying aloud, "I didn't want to kill him."

"I DIDN'T want to kill him," he told Lieutenant Desmond. Mr. Jalna kept out of sight of the body, while the detective stood behind the counter and gazed down upon it. "Why should I want to kill him? I never saw him before."

"Sure, we understand that." The lieutenant was calm, matter-of-fact. "You were standing here by the cash register?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did the boy actually fire at you?"

"I don't know."

The lieutenant glanced behind him. "We'll check it." He knelt behind the counter, straightened up again after a minute. "Gun doesn't smell like it's been fired."

"Look," Mr. Jalna pleaded, "this wasn't like television. I couldn't wait for him to take the first shot."

The lieutenant nodded, but his

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eyes were cold, noncommittal. "Take it easy, Mr. Jalna. We just want to get the complete picture, that's all. The kid's behind the counter, and he has a gun in his hand—"

"It was self-defense."

"I don't think there's any doubt of that, Mr. Jalna."

"I didn't want to kill him. Who wants to kill anybody?"

"Very few people," the lieutenant said, "but too many."

Mr. Jalna stood aside and watched the police do their work. Outside there were half a dozen police cars. Inside, the store seemed filled with men, most of them in shirtsleeves, not in uniform, doing things that Mr. Jalna really didn't understand. There were a couple of photographers, popping bulbs, taking pictures of everything.

They even took pictures of him, standing behind the counter, lying behind it. But many more pictures of the corpse, from all possible angles. Men looking everywhere, poking around, even outside, where the black Plymouth had parked.

Lieutenant Desmond eventually produced a wallet, taken out of the dead boy's hip pocket. "His name seems to have been Tommy Korth," he said. "Ever heard of that name, Mr. Jalna?"

"No, sir, I haven't."

An ambulance came, two men put Tommy Korth's body on a stretcher, covered it with a white sheet, and took it away. Mr. Jalna wanted to open one of the bottles on the shelves and have a drink. He almost asked the lieutenant if he could. But he reasoned that if he appeared too nervous, they might be suspicious. So he stood there helplessly and mopped his

brow with a sodden handkerchief.

One of the detectives had been working especially on Tommy Korth's gun. Now he walked to the lieutenant and told him something in a low voice. The lieutenant came over to Mr. Jalna.

"The boy's gun hasn't been fired."

Mr. Jalna nodded.

"What's more," the lieutenant went on, "it probably wouldn't fire. It's rusted up, and has a defective firing pin. And there aren't any bullets in it."

Mr. Jalna didn't open his store the next afternoon. He stayed in his tiny apartment and read what the papers said about the robbery and the killing.

The accounts seemed impartial, he thought, and related the facts rather accurately. There was no

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doubt that there had been an attempted armed robbery, that the intended victim had been within his rights in resisting, that he had no way of knowing that the robber's gun was empty and unworkable.

Tommy Korth had been seventeen. Should have been a high school senior, but had quit school. His father, John Korth, was an odd-job man, usually unemployed. He'd known about his son's quitting school, had tried occasionally to persuade him to return. He didn't know his son possessed a gun. In fact, he hadn't seen him too often lately. Tommy's mother had been dead for four years.

Tommy had had an older brother, twenty. His name was Terry. Terry had an unskilled job in a factory. He and Tommy had occupied the same room in the tiny Korth bungalow located in one of the poorer neighborhoods.

The black Plymouth had been found. It belonged to a twenty-year-old named Bob Swinton. Swinton had been driving the car, and the Korth brothers had been passengers. The other passengers had been two sixteen-year-old girls, Marcella Myers and Sue Zelder.

According to the story which those four told, the girls had been the dates of Terry Korth and Swinton. Tommy Korth had been tagging along, as he often did. Marcella Myers hadn't been fond of this arrangement, but Terry had been insistent. This was one way to keep an eye on his brother.

They'd been cruising the outskirts of the city, trying to find a liquor store which would sell them a bottle. Usually Bob Swinton or Terry made the approach. At Mr. Jalna's store, Tommy had wanted to go in.

When he came back out, he had said, "We could knock this place over easy."

There'd been a big argument between the Korths. Tommy had displayed the gun. Terry had known the gun was empty and defective. Tommy had insisted it would be enough to scare the proprietor. He was broke. He needed money. What easier way was there to get it?

Terry had become angry when Tommy wouldn't get into the car, but he didn't want to have a fight with him. So he told Swinton to drive off and leave him.

None of them had thought Tommy would try anything in the liquor store. He had talked before about pulling a hold-up, ever since he'd somewhat mysteriously come into the possession of that broken gun. But it had been nothing but talk. The four in the car had left Tommy and gone on to an all-night party. They hadn't heard about Tommy till hours later.

Mr. Jalna put down the paper and stared at the wall. It had been so foolish. What had been accom-

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plished? One less young punk to roam the streets? A sad, futile end to a wasted life.

Sell the business, Mr. Jalna decided. How can you go back to that place where you took the life of another human being? How can you walk over the bloodstains behind the counter? Sell the business, quick, even at a loss. Lock up the store till you get a buyer. Don't ever set foot in it again.

He was thinking these thoughts when the telephone rang. He answered it automatically.

"Mr. Jalna?"

"Yes, speaking."

"You the Mr. Jalna that runs the liquor store?"

"That's right."

"You the Mr. Jalna that's so handy with a gun?"

He didn't answer. He wanted to hang up. Some crank calling. He'd be getting a lot of this kind of attention for a while. But he didn't hang up.

"Are you that Mr. Jalna?"

"I suppose I am."

"You killed Tommy Korth."

"Yes."

"Why?"

"He had a gun."

"An empty gun."

"I didn't know it was empty."

"It wouldn't fire."

"I didn't know that either."

"You call it self-defense to shoot a boy with a broken, empty gun?"

"Yes, self-defense. That's what the law calls it too."

"Well, we don't agree, Mr. Jalna. Maybe the cops will let you get away with it. But we're not going to."

"What do you mean by that?"

The voice hesitated, then answered cryptically. "We'll be seeing you, Mr. Jalna."

Twenty-three miutes later Mr. Jalna sat in Lieutenant Desmond's office and told the policeman the entire conversation as he remembered it.

"Young voice?" the lieutenant asked.

"Yes, I would say young."

"One of Korth's friends. There's no evidence that he belonged to a gang. But every kid has friends. They can get awfully excited over a deal like this. Gives 'em a cause, a crusade. The legal aspects don't matter."

"What will they do, Lieutenant?"

"That's hard to say. Depends on the kids, what kind they are."

"Lieutenant Desmond, I want police protection."

The lieutenant leaned far back in his swivel. His iron gray hair was unkempt, his lined cheeks stubbled.

"Mr. Jalna," he said, "we'll do what we can. What are your store hours?" He hesitated. "Business as usual—or what?"

Mr. Jalna hesitated too.

"I thought of selling my business," he said finally. "Maybe I will. But not till this is over. I'm

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not going to let those punks run me out."

The lieutenant nodded enigmatically. Perhaps he approved, perhaps not.

"What about my revolver?" Mr. Jalna asked. "Can I keep it?"

"I see no reason why your permit should be revoked," the policeman said.

THREE DAYS passed. Tommy Korth had a big funeral, and after that the case dropped out of the newspapers. Business at Mr. Jalna's liquor store remained normal. Some people obviously stayed away, but new customers replaced them. A couple of men shook Mr. Jalna's hand, and told him that if more of the victims of criminals resisted as bravely, there would be less crime.

In between customers Mr. Jalna kept a wary eye on the highway. Police cars, he noted, seemed to pass by more frequently than they had before. At least half a dozen times a day one of them would stop, and a cop would come in and inquire if everything was all right.

Mr. Jalna watched for a dusty black Plymouth. The lieutenant had said developments might depend on how much imagination Tommy Korth's friends had. Mr. Jalna had very little imagination. The black Plymouth never came. But a cream-colored Ford did.

Just a minute before, a cop had come visiting. Mr. Jalna had reported things quiet, and the cop had driven away. The occupants of the cream-colored Ford must have been watching.

Mr. Jalna couldn't see how many there were. Only one got out, and he came immediately into the store. A tall kid, tall and slim, blond, ordinary face, neither handsome nor ugly. He wore a plaid sport jacket, open-throated shirt, no tie.

He walked straight up to the counter and stood there.

"I'm Terry Korth," he said.

Mr. Jalna stood by his cash register. His revolver was on the shelf inches away from his right hand. He could feel sweat on his palms, on the back of his neck.

"I'm sorry about your brother," he said.

"You didn't come to the funeral, Mr. Jalna."

"I didn't think I should."

"You didn't even send flowers."

"I didn't think I should do that either. I—"

"You must have been all broken up about shooting my brother."

"I did not like to shoot him."

"You didn't like to! You mean you didn't enjoy it?"

The boy's blue eyes were cold with hatred. His face was pale. He was breathing shallowly. His hands were on the counter, clutching the edge of it so hard that the knuckles showed white.

Mr. Jalna remained silent, not knowing what to say.

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"Did you enjoy it?" The boy's voice was shriller, more nervous. "The papers said you keep a gun all the time. You've shot at people before. You like guns, huh, Mr. Jalna? You like to shoot at people?"

Then Mr. Jalna saw it, the bulge in the right-hand side pocket of Terry Korth's plaid sport jacket. A bulge that looked hard and heavy, just like a gun.

"You're a murderer!" The accusation exploded, then reverberated and echoed, jabbing and hammering at Mr. Jalna from all directions.

"It was self-defense," he answered hoarsely, his mouth hot and dry. "They did not even arrest me—"

The boy was shaking his head. "Do you think that's the end of it, Mr. Jalna? Well, you're wrong. I don't care what the cops or anybody else thinks about it. You killed my brother!"

The boy started backing slowly toward the door. Mr. Jalna tensed. Was this just a warning, a threat, or would something happen right now? He hadn't been watching the car; all of his attention had been focussed on Terry Korth. Somebody else could have gotten out of the car, gone around to the rear of the building—could even be behind him.

He saw Terry Korth open the door with his left hand, and with his right make a movement toward that pocket that bulged. Mr. Jalna didn't wait. His own hand darted for the revolver, brought it up, fired.

His ears were filled with the violent noise, but under it he heard too the cry or scream or curse, whichever it was. He saw his target fall backward through the open doorway, hit the ground, then lie there writhing.

Mortally wounded? Or what? Mr. Jalna didn't know. But he didn't go to see. He couldn't have, even if he had wanted to brave those others in the car, or wherever they were. He couldn't move. He stood there, holding the smoking revolver, frozen with horror.

And then he heard the police siren, and saw the squad car come rocketing into his tiny parking area. . . .

Mr. Jalna sat there in that big office in the police headquarters building and felt very small, wondering how someone as small and insignificant as himself could get involved in anything like this.

Lieutenant Desmond was there, fingering his usual stubble of beard, and looking solemn and sour. But he wasn't the boss. Mr. Marcus was, a beefy, red-faced man who seemed to be constantly angry and belligerent. He was the district attorney.

Across the room sat Terry Korth. He was in shirtsleeves and the right shoulder of the shirt bulged over the bandage covering

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the flesh wound he had received. He looked pale, weak, but aggressive somehow, uncowed. Lined up beside him were three other boys, sullen, contemptuous of their surroundings, much in need of haircuts.

"This isn't quite the usual thing," Mr. Marcus started off, "bringing the two sides together face to face like this. But I'm hoping we can cool this thing off a little."

Terry Korth didn't seem to be listening. He stared at the floor. His features were set, inscrutable.

"Now Mr. Jalna is not going to press charges," Mr. Marcus went on, "and that's okay with me."

"He shot me!" Terry Korth exploded.

Mr. Marcus' face got a little redder. "That's right." The answer came fast, the words like machine-gun chatter. "He shot you. And he had a right to. You threatened him. He saw you reach toward your pocket—"

"I had a transistor radio in my pocket!"

"Right," Mr. Marcus said quickly. "We've been through that bit. Now whether you reached toward your pocket deliberately, to scare Mr. Jalna, or whether you happened to suddenly want to hear some music, we don't really know. You claim it was just a coincidence, so we'll take your word for it. But you had already threatened Mr. Jalna, you had a bulge in your pocket, and Mr. Jalna had just recently had an experience with your brother. It appears to me he had every right to go for his gun."

Terry Korth stood up, white and shaking. "Like with my brother. He had a broken gun and I had a radio. Nobody shot at Jalna!"

"Sit down," Mr. Marcus interrupted. "Sit down, or I'll have somebody help you sit down."

The boy hesitated for a moment, his eyes blazing. Then he obeyed, slumped miserably into his chair.

"It's just lucky for you, Korth," Marcus said, "that Mr. Jalna isn't a crack shot."

"He's just fast," Terry mumbled.

Marcus let it go.

"Okay," he went on, "we've had a death and a gunshot wound. That's as far as it's going to go. You hear me?"

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He paused. None of the boys said anything, or even looked at him.

"Now it's quite understandable, Terry," Marcus said, "that you should be disturbed about your brother's death. That goes for your friends here too." Marcus nodded toward the three other boys. "But you're putting the blame in the wrong place. When you try to pull an armed hold-up, you take chances. Your brother took those chances. So it was his fault in the first place. Secondly, it's your fault, you and the people who were in the car that night. It was your fault because you didn't talk him out of it. Maybe you're blaming Mr. Jalna to cover up for the guilt you feel yourself."

He stared at the boys.

Terry Korth nodded, his face bitter.

He said, "Blame it on me. Blame it on Tommy. Blame it on everybody but the guy with the gun."

"That's enough!" Marcus snapped. He surveyed the four boys. "Now get this straight. This is a warning. There's law in this town and we intend to uphold it. We intend to protect our citizens. Is that clear? Boys, we know who you are. You can't get away with a thing. The minute you try it, you'll be picked up. Is getting even with Mr. Jalna worth going to prison for?"

The boys were released, and Mr. Jalna went home. Like Mr. Marcus, he thought it was finished.

"I WAS HIS brother," Terry Korth said over the telephone. "You know what that means, Mr. Jalna? You ever had a brother? No, you probably didn't. There's probably only one of your kind. But I had a brother, and you killed him. Nothing is ever going to make me forget that. And nothing is going to stop me taking care of you. Call your cop friends if you want to. Have 'em come over. I'll tell 'em I didn't call you. I'm going to fix you, Mr. Jalna. And I don't care if I do go to jail for it. It'll be worth it. You'll be dead."

The connection clicked off softly. Mr. Jalna replaced the telephone receiver in its cradle, leaned back and exhaled slowly. Less than a week had gone by. If Terry Korth had been scared, the fright had already worn off.

There was no sense in going to the police. They couldn't do much till it was all over, one way or the other. That was what it amounted to in the end—you had to protect yourself.

He could try to sell the store, take the money, to to some other city and start again. Maybe Terry Korth would find him, maybe not. It was unlikely that he could afford to hire a private detective to find him. It was worth trying—better than killing Terry Korth, or being killed by him.

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Mr. Jalna put an advertisement in the newspaper. Business for sale.

He received one phone call in answer to the ad.

"You name's Jalna?" the inquirer asked.

"Yes, Jalna."

"You the guy who's been doing all the shooting?"

"Yes."

"I thought so."

"But I will sell my business and my inventory at a very reduced price. I will sacrifice—"

"No, thanks. That's not exactly a lucky location you have there. And who knows what a bunch of hopped-up kids will do these days."

The man hung up then.

Mr. Jalna kept running the ad, but without results. Other people seemed to share the belief—it wasn't a lucky location.

Nine days after he shot Terry Korth, Mr. Jalna received his second message from the enemy. This time it was delivered in person—not at night, when the police were more watchful, but early in the afternoon.

The messenger was a boy, fifteen or sixteen, not one of those who'd been at police headquarters. He had an unruly mop of black hair. Despite his youth, he looked tough.

"Terry Korth sent me," he announced immediately.

Mr. Jalna waited.

"Terry says that when you shot at him and his brother, it wasn't fair. He didn't have a gun, and his brother had a gun that didn't work. But Terry has a gun now. It works. So you be ready. He's going to come here and shoot it out with you. And this time it'll be fair."

Mr. Jalna couldn't believe what he'd heard. This was like television—the two cowboys in the dusty street, shooting it out.

Now the visitor was waiting. "Do you have anything to say to Terry?"

What should he do? Grab this boy, or try to hold him at gunpoint, and call the police? What would be the use? The boy would deny everything.

"Tell him I'm not listening," Mr. Jalna said finally. "Tell him I don't hear him."

The boy turned quickly and walked out. Mr. Jalna didn't bother to watch where he went. What was the use?

What was the use of anything? Mr. Jalna locked up the store. Business was falling off, anyway. He didn't like waiting on customers any more. He was too nervous. Anybody who came in was possibly a friend of the boy he had killed. Mr. Jalna went home. He took his revolver with him.

He was opening the door of his little apartment when the phone rang.

"Why did you leave the store?" Terry Korth's voice demanded.

"I—"

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"Are you afraid of someone with a gun? Are you afraid of a guy who can shoot back?"

Mr. Jalna hung up, wiped his damp forehead with the back of his hand. Why was he here when he should be at the store? He was a man who had believed in the right of private property, in the right of a citizen to protect himself. And in the duty and ability of the police to provide protection. What had happened to his confidence?

The phone rang again. He didn't want to pick it up, but the ring was insistent. This time the caller was Lieutenant Desmond.

"I got a report that your store was locked up. Anything wrong, Mr. Jalna?"

He hesitated. He could tell the lieutenant exactly what was wrong. And they'd go through the routine again. Pick up the boys, lecture them, increase the vigilance and frequency of the patrols. Or maybe give him a comfortable cell in the city jail, the only place in town where he'd really be safe.

Mr. Jalna hesitated for perhaps two seconds. Then he said, "I just don't feel very good today."

"You haven't heard from Terry Korth, have you?"

"No," Mr. Jalna lied.

"Well, let us know any time you're not going to be at the store."

"Yes, I will."

"We'll keep a look-out around your apartment building."

Yes, do that, Mr. Jalna said silently as he hung up. Only you can't do it. You can't do it right. There are a million other people you have to protect in this town, and there aren't enough of you. If a criminal is willing to take the risk, he can kill anybody he wants to. Police protection! It's a joke. It impresses some people, but it's not real. It doesn't exist.

He had made up his mind. He was going to run. From Terry Korth, from the police. He didn't want the police taking care of him any more. They hadn't taken care of him. He could still get threatening phone calls. People could walk into his store in broad daylight and issue a challenge to a gun fight. So he'd go somewhere and not tell anybody. Let the police protect his store.

He stayed in the apartment all afternoon and into the evening, making, remaking plans. He packed one suitcase. He had four hundred dollars hidden in a shoe in his closet. It would be enough for a start. Maybe in a month or so he'd recover his confidence and could come back. Either way, he had to go.

At nine-thirty he slipped out of the building by the rear door. Two blocks away he found a cab. The cab delivered him to the well-lighted waiting room of the bus station. He bought a ticket on a bus due to depart in twenty minutes. He bought a magazine and tried to read.

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He saw the teen-age boy who came in five minutes later. But the boy bought a magazine too, and Mr. Jalna breathed a little easier. Then, however, the boy sat down on the same bench about three feet away from Mr. Jalna. The boy opened the magazine and seemed to be reading.

There were maybe a dozen people in the bus station, but no one besides the boy was very close to Mr. Jalna. Still he wasn't too concerned. There were plenty of other people in sight, and the boy was a complete stranger.

But then the boy said, softly, "Mr. Jalna, there's a gun pointed at you. Pick up your suitcase and go out the south door."

Mr. Jalna did nothing. For a moment he couldn't move or think.

"You don't believe me? Look under this magazine."

The boy was holding the magazine in his lap. Mr. Jalna looked. He saw the little black muzzle, pointed at his stomach.

"The south door, Mr. Jalna, or I will kill you right here. If I have to do it right here, neither of us will have a chance."

Mr. Jalna knew how to recognize the inevitable. He dropped his own magazine on the bench, rose tiredly, picked up his suitcase, and headed for the south door.

He could hear the click of hard leather heels following him. But he did not yell for help or try to signal anyone. If there was shooting, innocent people might get in the way. He didn't want that to happen. He went out through the south door.

"Turn right and keep walking."

He did as he was told. They walked almost a block.

"The green Chevvy. Get in."

A door had swung open among the cars parked at the curb. Mr. Jalna stooped and plunged into darkness. Hands grabbed him and pulled him down onto the seat. The door slammed, the engine started, and the car moved.

"Hey, Jack, you did all right."

"I told you I'd get him."

"Mr. Jalna, I guess you've met Jack Colley. Our cousin. He was Tommy's cousin."

The car moved swiftly, probably just within the speed limits. Mr. Jalna sat between two boys in the back, one of whom was Jack. Terry Korth was up front, on the right, not driving.

"Do you have your gun, Mr. Jalna?"

He answered unwillingly, automatically. "In my suitcase."

"That's what we figured."

After that there was no real conversation in the car. Only an occasional word, and the directions Terry Korth gave to the driver. The boys were quiet, tense. Mr. Jalna might have questioned, demanded, but he was numb.

They were heading into the country. Mr. Jalna noticed without caring. The lights of the city thinned out. After a while they

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turned off the main highway, bounced down a gravel road. Now Mr. Jalna became aware that another car was following them. Not the police, of course, but another carload of Tommy Korth's relatives and friends.

When they stopped at last, there seemed to be nothing. Only an open field, which after the car lights were turned off, was illuminated by a full moon. An abandoned field, growing nothing but weeds. There were no buildings in sight. No signs of civilization. Not even a fence.

The boys piled out of the two cars. Hands pulled and pushed at Mr. Jalna. He stumbled on the rough ground, but the hands held him up. They stopped in the middle of the field, and the hands let go of him. He stood alone, swaying, confused, almost not caring.

"Where's the box?"

Somebody brought a bulky wooden box and sat it on the ground in front of Mr. Jalna. The top of the box was almost waist-high.

"Come on with the suitcase."

Mr. Jalna's suitcase was placed on the box, opened. "Here it is."

The suitcase was thrown aside. Mr. Jalna's revolver was put on the box. In the moonlight it looked like a live thing, a tiny coiled snake, loathsome, deadly. Mr. Jalna stared at it.

"That's the gun you killed Tommy with," Terry Korth said. "That box is like the shelf in your store, Mr. Jalna. That's the kind of place you draw from best. I'm giving you a break, Mr. Jalna."

Terry Korth's face was pale and white in the moonlight. As pale and white as his brother's face had been in death, the face that had looked up at Mr. Jalna out of the broken bottles and the blood.

"But there's a difference this time, Mr. Jalna. I have a real gun in my right-hand pocket. It's loaded and it works good."

The boy turned his back and started to walk away. A sudden insane desire stabbed through Mr. Jalna's brain—to grab his gun off the box and pour bullets into that insolent back. No matter that Jack Colley had a gun too—he'd shoot him down as well, all of them, these hoodlums who thought they were above the law. Jungle animals, he'd shoot them all.

But the idea evaporated out of Mr. Jalna's brain as quickly as it had entered. It had been a stupid, cruel idea, unworthy of a man. But the passing of the idea left Mr. Jalna's brain clear, empty of craven fear or unreasonable hate.

Terry Korth had stopped and turned about fifty feet away. He was clearly visible in the moonlight, especially his white face. The other boys had scattered to the sidelines. The field was silent except for the drone of an airplane far away, in the direction of the city.

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"Go for your gun, Jalna," Terry Korth said.

"You want me to kill you?"

"I'm giving you the chance to try."

"What happens if I kill you? Your friends—"

"My friends will take you back home. They have promised."

"And if you kill me, what will happen to you?"

"You bought a bus ticket. You left town."

"The police will look for me."

"We've got a big hole to dump you in, Mr. Jalna. Maybe they'll never find you. They'll need a body to prove anything."

"Terry, you're a fool. You're just a boy, throwing your life away. I'm not worth it—your brother wasn't worth it—a kid growing up to be a hold-up man."

"Go for your gun, Mr. Jalna!"

"No—think for a minute, I beg you—"

"Shut up! Go for the gun or I'll kill you anyway."

Mr. Jalna's hand grabbed for the top of the box. He saw the boy's hand reach too. Mr. Jalna had his revolver, the butt firmly inside his palm. The boy had something in his hand also. Orange flame spurted, and Mr. Jalna heard the whistle of the bullet going past his shoulder. Then he lifted his own gun and hurled it, as far as he could, out into the darkness.

"What did he do?" Terry's voice, startled.

"He threw his gun away."

"What!"

"He just threw it away!"

They converged upon Mr. Jalna, encircled him.

"What did you do that for?"

"I don't want to kill you."

"Find it! Find that gun! Look for it!" Terry cried to his companions.

"Don't bother. I won't pull the trigger."

"Jalna, if you think this'll stop me—I'll kill you!"

"Do it. Kill me. Hurry up. I am tired of running. I am tired of waiting for you. I am tired of being afraid."

They were silent for a long time, looking at him, and at one another.

It was the dead boy's cousin,

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Jack Colley, who finally spoke. His voice was hard, almost casual. He was the tough one. "He shouldn't be let die easy with a bullet anyway. Let's stomp him. When we're through we can throw him in the quarry like we said."

Mr. Jalna remembered the sharp, staccato footsteps of Jack Colley on the floor of the bus station. The boy was wearing fancy boots. They would hurt.

All around him, faces peered at him. Faces looking scared, excited, cruel, vengeful, all at the same time. Men had died on the ground before, from being kicked in the face, in the kidneys, in the belly, in the groin. He knew it, and so did they. They were all remembering reading things like that in the papers. They were all picturing it happening here in this lonely field.

"Okay, Terry?"

"No."

"Huh?"

"He's just a stinking old man. He hasn't got a gun—he can't do anything. He can't fight back—I just can't—"

"Terry, you're chicken!"

"Shut up! You hear me, Jack? Shut up!"

"What about Tommy?"

It came out then. The truth, finally, wrenched out of a tormented brain. Cleansing truth. The truth that sets men free. "He asked for it."

"What?"

"He asked for it. You go in with a gun, you deserve whatever you get. My little brother was a hood."

They stood, slack-jawed, incredulous, for a long time. Then they drifted away. They went back to their cars. Engines roared, lights blinked on, the cars sped off.

Mr. Jalna stood in the moonlit field. His suitcase was on the ground, its contents scattered. He started to pick it all up. He wouldn't be able to find the gun probably, he decided, so he didn't waste time searching.

He could go back to his store now, he knew. Those kids wouldn't bother him any more. He was free. Till some other punk kid thought he could knock off a liquor store. What a lousy business. What a lousy world.

But while he lived in it, he'd never be afraid again.

ANOTHER SHELL SCOTT CAPER NEXT MONTH

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THE WHITE CLOUD

by ARTHUR PORGES

High in the sky came a message—from a man who was buried alive.

SHERIFF REARDON said, his voice heavy with protest, "Two hundred square miles, that's all! And the roughest damned country in the state. Find him, the President says—and the attorney general—and the F.B.I. Sure, I know the territory, but there are a million caves—it's limestone all through the county—half of 'em never explored. So just how do I do it, hey? And in a few days, because the professor won't last too long. It may be summer on top, but it's damp and cold underground."

Tanner, the F.B.I. man, blinked at the sheriff's vehemence. "We could give you a lot of help. There are plenty of volunteers available, too."

"I know those volunteers," Reardon snapped. "Half of 'em will get lost in an hour. We'll have not one man, but fifty to find."

"What do you suggest?" Tanner asked in a mild voice. "That we give in to the Sentinels, and release Fawcett?"

"They may be bluffing. They won't let Professor Neal die. He never did them any harm."

"They couldn't care less about that. Besides, by their way of thinking, he's on the other side—a leftist. They'd exterminate him like a bug. You saw the ultimatum. Either the government pardons their leader, or Neal is left to die in some unknown cave. These boys play rough; they mean it."

"I suppose the President won't budge," Reardon said wistfully.

"You know better than that," Tanner said. "The guy's guilty of

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armed insurrection, fraud, violation of federal firearms laws—the works. He got off easy with three years." His cold blue eyes bored into the sheriff's. "We've got to find Professor Neal, and fast. He's not a young man—sixty-two—and being locked in a cave is no health cure."

"We can try," Reardon said glumly. "Pour in all the experienced men around, but the odds are bad. You've no idea how hard it is to comb even one square mile of rough country. Frankly, I don't think we'll find him in time."

The third man, who had been standing by in silence, spoke for the first time. "Neal's the best entomologist in the government. We can't afford to lose him."

Reardon gave him an impatient glance. "Bugs!" he snorted. "They are important?"

"When they eat our food, yes!" the man said. He was small, rumpled, owlish, but had a deep, authoritative voice.

"Any suggestions, Dr. Jacobi?" the F.B.I. agent asked, faintly ironical.

"I was hoping somebody might ask," the little man said, his own voice almost ostentatiously neutral.

"I'm listening," Tanner said.

"Well," Jacobi said. "To begin with, it's clear from the ultimatum that no Sentinels are hanging around the cave; that might make it easier to spot. Probably they either chained Neal inside, or rolled a heavy stone in front of the entrance."

"Makes sense," Reardon grunted. "But how does it help us find him?"

"He was kidnaped this morning," Jacobi went on, as if the sheriff hadn't spoken. "He was going to Bateman University for a lecture tonight. Now I infer that Professor Neal is a highly intelligent man. I'm not qualified to judge his work—my field is botany—but other entomologists praise his research."

"We've very little time," Tanner said.

The little man said, "Neal couldn't start a fire to make smoke; they'd be smart enough to take his matches. He'd have nothing to burn in a cave but his clothes, anyhow. So he can't signal that way. But he's a very ingenious man, as his report on the pine moth showed."

"Look," Reardon said. "If you have a suggestion, make it. I can't round up a hundred men in five minutes, you know."

"As you said," Jacobi told him, unperturbed, "they're not likely to find him. All I need is a helicopter, to take off just before sunset. And," he added thoughtfully, "you might borrow a Snooperscope from Fort Ord."

"Snooperscope?" Tanner repeated sharply.

"It throws an infra-red beam to show up objects at night on a special screen," Jacobi said.

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"I know what it does, but what use is one gadget for two hundred square miles?" Reardon said.

"Maybe none, but I count on Professor Neal's ingenuity," the little man said. Tanner looked at Reardon.

"Who's wasting time now?" Jacobi asked gently.

At 7:40, summer dusk smoked up from the rugged terrain below. The helicopter pilot sent his ship swooping down.

"Where to?" he yelled over the roar of the engine.

Jacobi peered through powerful binoculars. So far every scrutiny had drawn a blank. Could he possibly be overestimating Neal—or faulting the Sentinels, who might have foreseen the plan? Suddenly he tensed.

"There!" he snapped. "Follow that whitish cloud—like a stream: the ones going down toward southwest."

The pilot gaped at him, but Tanner nodded vigorously, his deep-socketed eyes alight. Damned if the little longhair hadn't come through after all!

Wordlessly, but with an eloquent expression, the pilot obeyed. As they dived in pursuit of the pale streamer, another one joined it. Fifteen minutes later several more converged on the same line—hundreds of moths in all—fluttering about the brush on the side of a hill.

"That must be the cave!" Jacobi rumbled. "Set us down there if possible."

It was—barely.

When they landed, and rolled the huge boulder away from the narrow opening, a white-haired man, thin and spry, slipped out. He looked at them through bleary eyes, the pupils dilated from the dark. His gaze fell upon Jacobi.

"Max!" he exclaimed. "I'm glad they had sense enough to consult you. I wasn't sure—"

"I went to them," the little man interrupted. "When I learned from your assistant that you were taking a vial of that concentrated extract from the female moths to the university, I guessed, and hoped, you'd think of using it to make the cave conspicuous. After all, one tiny drop is supposed to bring males from miles around. What else could mark the spot where those fanatics put you, locked in a black hole with no equipment?"

Jacobi gestured to the giant swirl of excited insects, a pale mobile still visible in the failing light; they were pouring into the cave, and more flew into the clearing every minute.

"They expect to find the Sophia Loren of the species in there, yes, Harry?"

"You might say that," Neal laughed. He stepped towards the helicopter. "I've never missed a lecture in my life. If we hurry, I can still make the one tonight. Let's go!"

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BURIAL

by HAL ELLISON

Two men and a woman had mixed their evil brew. Part was love and hate—and part was trackless murder . . .

A DOZEN SILENT men sat at the long table. No one ever spoke at breakfast, nor at any meal. They were men who were untalkative by nature. Besides, the labor they performed from sunup to sundown did not encourage conversation.

All were here temporarily. Three months at the most and they'd be on their way to the next place, wherever that might be, for they were migrants whose futures were ever nebulous and uncertain.

The foreman, Yankowski, was somewhat luckier. At least, he had a house, a wife and he did not have to wonder where he would next be working. Still, he did not have the best of things, not with Dumont, the owner of the farm.

Dumont was a difficult man to please and given to moods and ec-

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centricities that made the foreman wonder.

Dumont had lost his wife. She lay in the family plot across the road from the big white farmhouse. Perhaps that was it. Living alone and keeping to himself isn't good for a man.

Yankowski's wife, May, came from the kitchen now with a huge pot of coffee and began to pour for the men. Yankowski glanced at her. She was twenty-two, half his age, blonde and pretty. As she reached him, a whistle sounded from outside. Yankowski lifted his head and grunted. It was still early, and the oil-lamp burned on the table.

The whistle sounded again, sharper, and Mary said, "You'd better go out and see what Mr. Dumont wants."

"Something crazy again, that's what," Yankowski grunted. "Why can't he wait?"

"Better go," Mary warned. "You know how he is."

"I know. Sure, I know. He don't come in and talk to you like you're a man. He whistles from outside and you got to jump," Yankowski grumbled and arose from the table.

The screen door slammed behind him.

Dumont stood on the dirt path that led to the house, a solid dark figure meshed in the grey pre-dawn light. Yankowski brushed his face with a calloused hand. "Yes, Mr. Dumont?"

"One of the horses is dead."

Yankowski nodded and remained silent. "She'll have to be buried first thing this morning. Get the men out in the south field and meet me at the barn," Dumont said and turned abruptly away.

The sky was a pearly grey when the men left the table and started for the barn. Yankowski finished his coffee, and Mary came from the kitchen. She blew out the lamp.

"What did Mr. Dumont want?" she asked.

"One of the horses died," Yankowski answered and struck the table with his fist. "It's got to be buried, so he picks me for the dirty work."

"Well, someone has to bury it."

"Sure, but I'm the foreman. To keep me in my place, that's the way to do it, always some filthy job like that. Digging a pit will take all day in that hot sun with nobody helping."

"Well, you better do it if you want to stay here," Mary warned him.

He knew she was right, but didn't want to hear this. It was almost as if she were taking Dumont's side, and this wasn't the first time. Angry, he arose from the table and said, "I've a good mind to tell him to bury that horse himself."

"Are you insane? He'd fire you in a second. Then where would you go in the middle of the season. Who'd hire you?"

Her logic was unanswerable. He

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was beaten and knew it. He went out the door. The sun was just rising, fire streaked the sky; another hot day was in the making. He moved toward the barn. The men were waiting; no one spoke when he reached them. The truck was ready. He climbed behind the wheel, the men in back.

Baskets lay in the south field, where they'd been left at sundown the previous day. He stopped the truck. Silently the men climbed from it, picked up baskets and began picking.

Yankowski drove back to the barn. Dumont awaited him. The men had dragged the dead horse from the stable. A swarm of flies already littered it.

"All right," said Dumont. "Get that chain attached to the truck. We'll drag her out to the windbreak."

Yankowski ran the chain around the neck of the dead animal, attached it to the back of the truck and climbed behind the wheel. Dumont climbed in beside him and nodded.

A few minutes later they passed the north field. Ahead of them a stand of white oak trees formed a windbreak. They left the rutted road and rumbled into the grove.

"All right. Here," Dumont said.

The truck halted and he stepped from the cab. Yankowski came round from the other side. Dumont handed him a shovel and picked up a twig. With the twig, he inscribed an oblong in the dirt and stepped back. "That's it, Yank."

Yankowski stared at the marks and shook his head. "Too small. We'll need a bigger pit than that," he said and raised his eyes to Dumont's.

"Just start digging," Dumont answered with his usual bluntness. "I know what I'm doing."

There was no point in arguing. Yankowski set to work. The morning was still cool and dew glittered on the fields. Soon it vanished; the heat came in withering blasts.

"Going to be another hot one," Dumont said, lighting his pipe. "A few more days like this and we'll be in trouble."

Yankowski didn't reply. He was having trouble breaking ground; the bone-dry earth resisted the shovel. He swore under his breath, and Dumont said, "When you get down a bit, it'll be easier going."

"It'll still be a job," Yankowski answered sullenly without looking up. "It's a job for four men."

"Maybe, but I can't spare them. There's a lot of picking to be done."

"Somebody should be watching the men."

"I guess I can take care of that," Dumont said. "You just go on with the digging."

It was growing hotter by the moment. Yankowski still was making no headway, and this whole business of burying the dead horse made no sense. Finally he stopped his shovel and looked up sullenly.

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"Pretty tough going, hey?" Dumont said, grinning at him.

"It's not that."

"Something wrong with the shovel?"

"No, but I don't see any sense in burying this animal."

"Got to," said Dumont. "In this heat, that carcass'll stink to high heaven."

"Way out here nobody will smell it."

"Even if nobody does," Dumont allowed, "it has to be buried for sanitary reasons."

To argue was useless, but Yankowski nodded to the lines Dumont had marked off and said, "The pit will have to be bigger."

"You just keep digging, Yank. I know what I'm doing," Dumont answered and turned away. He went to the truck and climbed behind the wheel. "Going to check the men," he said from there. "Want me to bring some water?"

"Bring a gallon."

Dumont laughed and drove off for the south field in a cloud of yellow dust. Yankowski waited, then dropped the shovel and sat down. He rolled a cigarette. A yellow cloud of dust hung over the fields. The stillness was intense now, the heat blistering.

Yankowski eyed the dead horse. A black army of flies was already at it. The flies of death, he thought, and turned to the pit. He shook his head. Bury the animal in that? Dumont was crazy. This wasn't the first time the thought had occurred. There were so many odd things he'd noticed about Dumont, but this . . .

Still angry, he arose and started digging again. Three hours later Dumont returned. The pit was half dug and Yankowski sat off under a tree. Dumont glanced at the pit and came to him.

"What's the matter? You gave up?"

"Not exactly. What happened to the water?"

"It's in the truck. I had some business at the house with the wholesaler. Couldn't get back to you sooner."

Or take the water off the truck, Yankowski thought, rising and going to the truck. The gallon jug was under the dashboard. He took it out, lifted it to his mouth, drank and spat in disgust.

"Something wrong?" asked Dumont.

"Wrong? This damned water is hot."

"Heck, I filled it when I got to the house, and that damned wholesaler got my ear. I forgot about the jug. Here, let me have it and—"

"Never mind. I can last till noon."

"Suit yourself." Dumont climbed into the truck and drove off.

Yankowski was still holding the jub. Lifting it again, he flung it with an oath after the departing truck.

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At noon the men filed into the bare dining room and sat down to the long table. There were no preliminaries. The men dug in; the usual silence prevailed. Heaping platters of food vanished quickly. Mary brought seconds, then went to the door with a plate covered with a towel. Yankowski raised his eyes and frowned.

"What's that?" he asked.

"Potato pancakes for Mr. Dumont."

"He can't come and get them himself?"

"When you make something, you take it to the one you give it to, don't you?"

Yankowski had no reply. The screen door closed behind Mary. Heads down, the men at the table went on eating. By the time Mary returned, they had left and were lying in the shade of the barn.

Yankowski still sat at the table, a sullen look on his face.

Mary began to clear the table. He watched her; she avoided his eyes. Finally he got up. As he reached the door, Mary said, "Did you finish digging the pit?"

"Not yet," Yankowski answered and went out the door.

EXACTLY at one, Dumont appeared at the barn. The men climbed on the truck, Yankowski got behind the wheel. Dumont sat beside him. Heat waves danced on the withering fields. The truck moved off.

Yankowski left the men in the south field and drove on to the stand of oaks. Both men got out. Dumont glanced at the pit and said, "Another hour should do it."

Yankowski nodded and picked up the shovel. You crazy fool, he thought. That horse isn't going in that hole.

Dumont looked up at the sky.

"No sign of rain," he said. He shook his fist, then wandered off into the oaks, talking to himself. Yankowski watched him go to a tree, stop before it and look up, waving his hands.

Talking to a tree now. That's something, Yankowski thought. Suddenly Dumont was coming toward him, shouting, "Get that damned shovel going. I'm not paying you to stand around like a dummy."

Yankowski flushed and began to dig. Dumont climbed into the truck and swung it around. At that moment Yankowski remembered the jug of water he had filled and placed under the dashboard.

"Wait, the water jug," he shouted. Dumont ignored him and drove off.

The belly of the horse had swollen and seemed ready to burst.

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Flies were over it, buzzing evilly.

Yankowski looked up from the pit and across the fields. Sweat dripped from him; his head ached.

The heat waves appeared to be closing in. Now they were assuming fantastic shapes; nebulous ghost-like figures beckoned, vanished and reappeared to goad him anew. Perhaps it was the terrible heat, that with the anger he'd suppressed for so long. The violence within him exploded.

Kill Dumont, he thought, and instantaneously he conceived a plan which seemed to have been in his mind. Here was the grave to lay the body, the shovel to deal the lethal blow and bury the evidence.

The dead animal on top of the grave, he thought. No one will think Dumont's underneath. Oh, Mary, Mary, we'll go away to a new place.

A cloud of dust billowed up in the distance. The truck was returning. The heat waves danced, vanished. The truck loomed suddenly near, stopped. Dumont climbed from the cab, approached the pit and looked down, eyes glinting.

"What, you're not finished yet?"

"Not quite."

"Here, let's have that shovel and get out of there. I'll show you the way it's done."

Yankowski hesitated, then handed up the shovel and started to climb from the pit. A savage blow smashed his skull and tumbled him backward into the pit.

Dumont looked down at his victim, then set to work with the shovel. When the pit was filled, he chained the dead horse to the back of the truck and dragged it over the spot where Yankowski lay buried.

That done, he drove back across the fields, left the truck at the barn and walked slowly toward Yankowski's house. As he reached the door, Mary's face appeared, shadowed by the screen and strange looking, as if age had suddenly come upon her. Slowly he pushed open the door, and Mary backed away, eyes open wide.

"Did you do it?" she said. Her voice was husky. Dumont nodded.

"Dead and buried," he answered, then sat down and wiped his sweating face.

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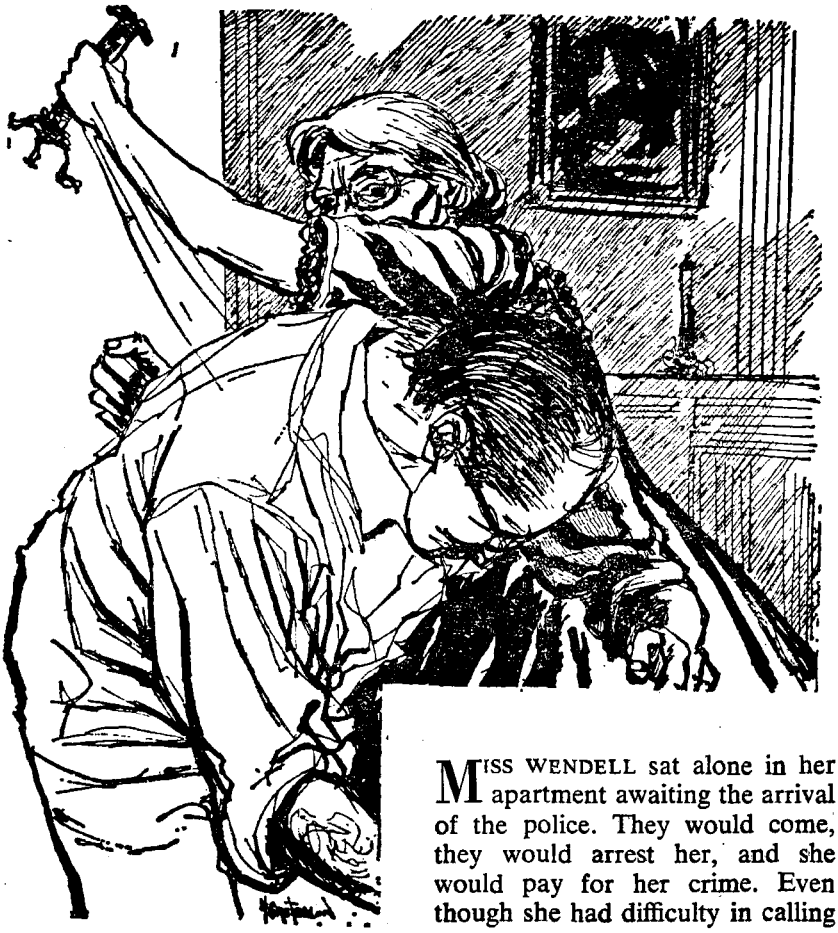
AN ACT OF COMPASSION

Q.—When is a murder not a murder?
Ans.—When nobody will believe it happened.

by PAUL W. FAIRMAN



MISS WENDELL sat alone in her apartment awaiting the arrival of the police. They would come, they would arrest her, and she would pay for her crime. Even though she had difficulty in calling

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it murder in the strictest sense, she would still pay.

She had good reason to trust her judgment. Twenty years as a staff nurse at Baldwin State Mental had conditioned her thought processes most admirably. She was grimly familiar with the pitfalls of rationalization, with the need for logic as a basis of all constructive thinking.

The chaotic aura of a mental hospital got you or it didn't. Start suffering with the patients and you were lost. Miss Wendall learned early in her career that objectivity was the key. Thus, she'd ably survived thirty years of service, to be pastured now, into whatever fields a slim pension and even slimmer resources would afford.

There had been some grounds for bitterness in this last, but Miss Wendall never allowed it to become personal. She was too sensible for that. Instead, she expelled her normal, healthy resentments more broadly, against the general faults of the system.

And that was how she became objectively involved with Mr. and Mrs. Brent. They loomed as ideal symbols of a system flaw that made her blood boil.

Mrs. Brent, a patient at Baldwin State Mental, was eighty-four, miserably regressed, and a burden. Mr. Brent was somewhat younger, extremely wealthy, and resentful of burdens to a point where he kept his useless wife right where she was—holed up in a mental institution.

Psychiatrically, Mrs. Brent had been certified as being safe for home care. That meant Mr. Brent could have had her back. But he could not be forced to accept the responsibility. As a citizen and a taxpayer he was entitled to a state hospital as a haven for his ailing wife.

And that was the situation when Miss Wendell went into retirement. Her career had ended and with it, all interest in the things of her career, including Mr. and Mrs. Brent. They were now merely another irritating memory.

She'd gone to the city, mildly thrilled by her new freedom, and spent a few days in a hotel. But then, when she checked the phone book for a list of rental agents, she also checked—through purest whim—the address of Mr. Brent.

She had no intention of contacting him personally, and she didn't quite know herself why she took a bus in his direction one afternoon. But it was fortunate that she did, because it solved her problem. Mr. Brent lived modestly enough—very modestly for so wealthy a man—in a building with a sign at the court entrance.

The sign read: *2 Room Apartment Available.* Miss Wendell found the superintendent and asked to be shown. The apartment was ideal for her needs, with some furniture for sale. Even though it

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rented for quite a little more than she could actually afford, she shoved caution back into the closet and said, "I'll take it."

In absolute truth, it wasn't until she had settled in that she checked and found that her window looked directly across into that of Mr. Brent.

This annoyed her at first, and the annoyance was probably what caused her to keep glancing across at Mr. Brent's window. There could be no other possible reason. There was so much in the city; the museums, the library, a lot of sightseeing.

The new routine and an entirely logical worry about her financial future were certainly enough to make her forget all about the Brents and the injustice that had been a part of her other life, not this one.

She caught sight of him several times, reacted with distaste, and couldn't help but learn a little about his ways and habits. She saw him twice in the street, a wizened, birdlike little man with a perpetual frown. And she reacted with even greater distaste.

So again, it had to be purest whim—perhaps an urge to clear her mind once and for all of him—that Miss Wendell went up one afternoon and pushed the buzzer beside his door.

His greeting was close to uncivil. A brusk demand: "What do you want?"

But Miss Wendell was too objective to reply in kind.

"I'm Helen Wendell," she said. "I was acquainted with your wife at Baldwin State Hospital."

"She was all right when I went up there a month ago."

"You don't understand. I'm not here officially. I'm retired from service. I merely thought—"

Miss Wendell wasn't able to form it into words. She was really a little frightened and wished she hadn't come. She was no doubt ready to turn on her heel and retreat, but at the crucial moment, Mr. Brent dredged up a little courtesy from somewhere and grudgingly asked her in. So again, the trend of events was decided by sheer chance.

A few more seconds of hesitation on Brent's part and—

Anyhow, Miss Wendell accepted and found a quite tastefully decorated apartment inside, somewhat larger than her own, and no doubt very pleasant for a wealthy man with no responsibilities.

"Mrs. Brent would enjoy living here," Miss Wendell said.

"Mrs. Brent is fine where she is."

"I would imagine you'd miss her."

Brent did not offer Miss Wendell a chair, feeling possibly that she might get comfortable and stay too long. He crossed over to the beautiful red brick fireplace, took a defensive stance and repeated, "She's fine where she is."

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Miss Wendell strolled to the window and drew back the curtain. "I'm a neighbor of yours," she said. "I live directly across the court."

Mr. Brent seemed to regard this news as dismal. "What's that got to do with Mrs. Brent? That's what you came about, wasn't it?"

"Not necessarily. I don't quite know why I did come. But tell me —has Mrs. Brent any relatives who could take care of her if she were permitted to leave the hospital?"

"She's got nobody and neither have I and we both like it that way. So if you have no further questions about the—"

Then it happened. Mr. Brent turned and bent down to brush some ashes into the fireplace and Miss Wendell walked over and picked up a heavy silver candlestick and hit him on the back of the head. He went down solidly and without comment. The short-handled broom he was holding fell from his hand.

Stunned by her own unexplainable act, Miss Wendell still functioned, but her movements were reflexes from some deep inner reaction. She was not aware of wiping the candlestick—not until she looked at the handkerchief she'd used, shuddered, and thrust it into her pocket. Her next act was purely humanitarian.

She went to her knees and impulsively thrust her hand toward the wound in Mr. Brent's skull. It was incredible that an ordinary candlestick, wielded impulsively by a non-muscular female could put such a lethal gash in solid bone.

Miss Wendell withdrew her hand. She looked at it. She shuddered again, even more violently this time, and wiped it off on the harsh brick surface of the fireplace.

AT THIS POINT the horror of the situation must have partially blacked her out, because her next clear realization was of sitting on her own sofa in her own apartment, staring at the wall. She had killed a man. She was a murderess!

Resolutely, as a result of long training, she quelled the panic below. When questions bubbled up into her mind, when it demanded an answer to the *why* of the terrible act, she took stern control. That didn't matter now. It was done and no answer would undo it. Not the last hour, but the next, was important. She would sit there quietly until they came for her.

But no one came. The afternoon passed. Evening arrived. And with evening, sounds from outside indicating discovery of the tragedy. The wail of a siren stopping in front of the building. Then another; wheels put in motion by her act of violence.

But still no one came. Miss Wendell waited through the dreadful hours, mentally rehearsing the dig-

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nity with which she would submit to the law. Finally, although shes wasn't hungry, she went into the kitchen and devoured a substantial steak because she would certainly need the strength it would provide.

By mid-afternoon of the next day, she'd grown quite impatient with the new flaw she'd discovered in the system; the obvious laziness of the police when it came to tracking down killers. Certainly a neighbor or two had reported her visit.

When she could wait no longer, she went across the court to give herself up.

The door to Mr. Brent's apartment was ajar and she found the superintendent gathering up used flash bulbs and other debris. A sour person and not blessed with any great tact, the super grunted and said, "Got curious, huh?"

"Not exactly. I—"

"Was he a friend of yours?"

"Not exactly. I—where are the police?"

"Directing traffic, I guess. No reason for them to move in."

"But with a murder involved, I thought—"

"A murder? Are you kidding?"

"Mr. Brent wasn't murdered?"

"He tripped over a broom handle and hit his head on the fireplace. See? Right there on the edge of the bricks. An old man. A brittle skull."

"But didn't the police question anybody? Didn't anyone see—"

"The cops questioned but no one saw anything. There wasn't anything to see. Nobody snuck in or out. It was an accident."

Miss Wendell returned to her apartment. It was all so ridiculous. But of course she would be able to prove her act of violence. The candlestick with prints—

Good heavens! She'd wiped them off! The gout of blood and brains on the fireplace brick. She had, by sheerest chance, wiped it onto a sharp edge.

But there was other evidence. It would be enough. Her knowledge of the situation. Her apartment; directly across from that of Mr. Brent. Her confession would be accepted.

But, an hour later, she was still in her apartment.

There was Mrs. Brent to be considered. She would be free now—free to enjoy the little time she had left. And she would need someone. With someone of integrity to depend on—"

Miss Wendell realized these were difficult and dangerous thoughts.

She must face cold truth. She must do her duty.

It had not been a murder. Not in the strictest sense.

It had been an act of compassion.

Thus, Miss Wendell faced reality and turned her mind to other things—to the many new plans that would have to be made.

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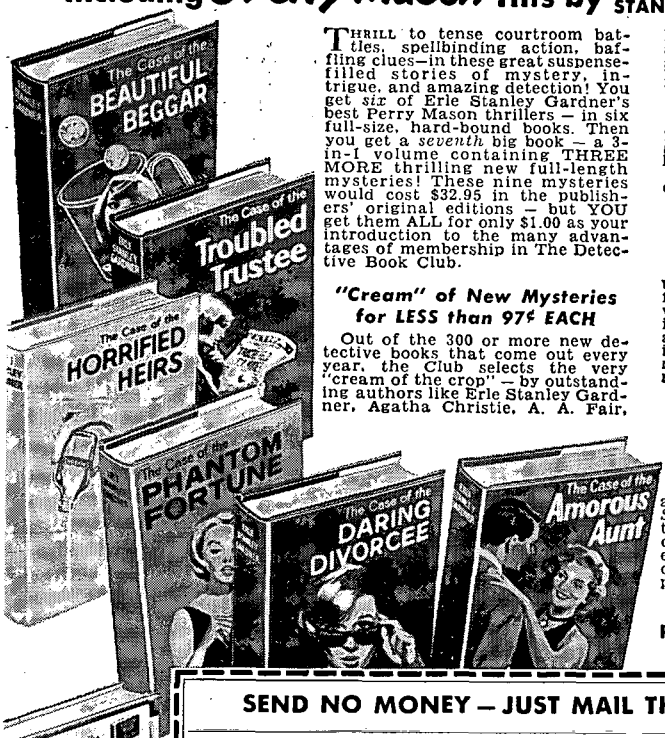
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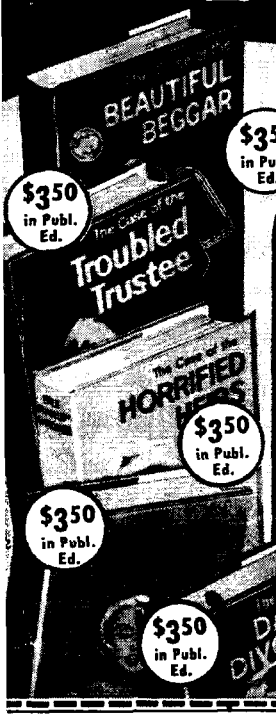
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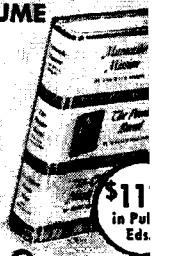

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